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Manila Navigating the Chaos by Roger Starkey

Honking, tire screeching, pedestrians dodging cars as they attempt to navigate non-existent crosswalks and cars, jeepneys, buses, tricycles, motorcycles and motor scooters ignoring all existing traffic laws. The only thing absent from Manila traffic is order.

Getting around Manila is often an overwhelming proposition for the city's residents and can be downright unfair to its guests. Visitors to the capital city of the Philippines may leave this wonderful city with a bad impression caused by their understandable inability to conquer the transportation chaos. The following hints and tips are offered to conquer an excursion within Manila. Before beginning, I should offer the most important advice of all; if you approach your travels in Manila the same way the Filipinos approach life-with a smile and a sense of humor-getting there can be all the fun and not merely half the fun.

Taxicab

Taxicabs are abundant in Manila. The problem is that the taxi drivers are as crooked as they are plentiful. The best way to protect yourself is to insist that they run their meter. This won't stop you from receiving an unnecessary tour on the way to your destination. It will, however, ensure that you pay the correct price for your tour. If the driver offers you 'a good price' for the journey, simply insist that the meter be used. This request is very rarely refused. However, if the driver still refuses, ask to be let out of the taxi immediately.

Public Transportation...

Adding to an already troubled traffic situation is that fact that public transportation doesn't exist in Manila. Intra city trains and buses, which are traditionally-at least in the western world-forms of public transportation, are run by the private sector in Manila. The competing interests of these companies, and, therefore, lack of cooperation, cause many unnecessary delays and additional traffic congestion.

The intra-city train system is two distinct private systems, the LRT and the MRT. Each system consists of one, and only one, line. Although the systems do meet at a common point, a simple transfer cannot be made between trains. A new ticket must be purchased for the second leg of the journey.

A good way to save travel time is by not looking for route maps or trying to plan your train travels. While you may be lucky enough to receive a ticket with a map, you will not find one for general distribution or consumption before you have bought a ticket. Simply tell the ticket seller where you are going and that person will tell you which stop is necessary and if you will need to switch trains. When on the train itself, it is a good idea to align yourself with one of the locals to ensure that you disembark at the proper station. The names of the stations can be difficult to decipher when called out by the conductor and, if you are not in a perfect location on the train, the signs on the platforms may be impossible to see. Another possibility is to remain next to the door so that you can poke your head out and look up and down the platform until you have located a sign with the name of the station. The LRT is better equipped to ease your struggles because many of these trains have maps on the inside of the carriages.

The other traditional public transportation option, intra-city buses, adds a layer of travel complexity so deep that I have not even dared an attempt to unravel its complete mystery. What I have been able to determine is that there are multiple private bus companies providing intra-city service in Manila and they seem to be competing for passengers on the same routes. The result is that multiple buses arrive at a stop at the same time and begin blaring their horns to announce their arrival. 'Conductors' then emerge from the buses holding hand-painted wooden signs that announce the destinations. After a short time, the buses honk their horns to announce their departure and then turn back into traffic with little regard for other vehicles. At some of the busier stops, a constant inflow and outflow of fifteen to twenty horn honking buses is common. The sea of horn-blaring buses narrowly dodging pedestrians, street vendors and each other is an example of Manila traffic bedlam at its finest. Bring a camera.

If you are intent on traveling by intra-city bus in Manila, my advice is to seek the advice of anyone nearby. Filipinos are always extremely kind to tourists and willing to help ensure that you find your destination.

Jeepney

The most colorful and unique method of mass transportation in Manila is the jeepney. Jeepneys can be found in the thousands plying the streets of the capital-and of most every town in the Philippines-shuffling commuters to and fro at bargain prices. Jeepneys are World War II era designed Jeeps with long bench seats on either side of the covered, colorful rear area. While it is possible to find a few modern jeepneys with a one-tone paint job, most are ornately decorated and painted with a flair uniquely Filipino.

The jeepneys each serve a very short, set route, which is painted on the side of the vehicle. To hail a jeepney, you simply need to wave as it approaches and then hop in the back when it stops for you. Once inside, ask any of the other riders the fare and hand your money forward toward the driver. When you have reached your destination, yell 'para' (Tagalog for stop) to the driver and make your way out quickly. The jeepney may or may not come to a complete stop to let you disembark.

Tricycle and Calesa

Two slower forms of transportation are the tricycle and the calesas. Tricycles (a motorcycle or bicycle with a sidecar) are a common sight in the tourist-lined streets of the Ermita, Pasay City and Intramuros sections of Manila. These can be hired for short trips and the rates vary. Make sure you agree the rate before getting in. The calesas are horse-drawn carriages that also prowl the tourist areas. Pulling the calesas are astonishingly tiny horses. They make up for their lack of size with a great deal of gumption and have little trouble managing their workloads.

A tourist, especially a Caucasian, will have no difficulties finding a tricycle or a calesa. The drivers seek out the tourists and ask them repeatedly if they would like a ride. If you hear repeated calls of 'hey' that appear to be directed at you, they probably are. 'Hey' is tricycle and calesa driver speak for 'excuse me.' If you are not interested in a ride, you may need to tell the driver 'no thank you' several times before being left in peace. The drivers are, however, more insistent than rude and you should not feel threatened by their persistence.

Possessing the preceding information can't guarantee safe travel within Manila but it may, at least, ease some of the strain. Remember, the most

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Manila Navigating the Chaos

important thing to bring with you to Manila is your smile. It may serve as your only buffer between enjoyment and frustration.

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