

## **Taxi violence is bad for everybody**

On Sunday, my family and I decided to take a trip from Pretoria to Johannesburg. Our destination was the African Market located in the Maboneng precinct. This was a landmark decision as for us, from north of the Jukskei river, the eateries of Jo'burg which are worth a visit ends somewhere around Sandton Square. But having read widely about the African Market and what it offers, we decided it was time to give it a go. Normally the notion of driving into the innards of Jo'burg (even on a Sunday) is a definite no-no for those of us who still think of Pretoria as a big sleepy town rather than a city. But these days there are two factors that combine to easily overcome this "big city" inhibition: the Gautrain and Uber.

So on Sunday morning, just after 10, all four of us were relaxing in the Gautrain and speeding towards Johannesburg Park Station at what my iPhone indicated to be around a blistering 160 km/h. Barely 40 minutes later we were standing in warm sunshine on Wolmarans Street in the heart of Johannesburg – at the bargain price of R69 each! The next step was to hail an Uber car and within 2 minutes our driver Kenneth (not his real name) pulled up next to the kerb to pick us up. We piled in and were ready to go, but then the trouble started....

Suddenly, the car was surrounded by 4 men who were screaming and shouting at us. One of the men leaned in through the driver's window, grabbed the keys of the car from the ignition and threw them onto the bonnet of the car – as if to challenge anyone to get out of the car and retrieve them. An argument ensued between Kenneth and two of the men. I couldn't follow the argument and only picked up the word Uber every now and then. My thoughts were with my wife, son and daughter sitting in the back of the car and their safety. My wife was urging me that we should get out of the car and walk away, but I felt it was safer inside the car – for the time being anyway.

One of the men started shouting at me: "why are you using Uber?" By this time, I had figured out two things. Firstly, these men were metered taxi drivers who were upset with the competition from Uber. Their solution to this unwanted competition was obviously to intimidate any Uber drivers as well as their passengers. Secondly, I gathered that Kenneth was denying being an Uber driver. In response to this the men had diverted their questioning to me in an attempt to get an acknowledgement that I had hailed the Uber service. I politely refused to "get involved" in their argument and after some more shouting by them and denials by Kenneth they allowed us to drive off. All of us, including Kenneth, were badly shaken by this experience.

During our drive to the African Market, Kenneth confirmed my suspicions that these men were metered taxi drivers and described to me the problems Uber drivers experience with this kind of intimidation. Apparently, a few months ago an Uber driver was actually shot at this very station! But the worst thing to me about this whole experience was that a few cars behind the point where we were picked up by Kenneth, a JMPD van with two cops inside was parked. They must have witnessed the whole incident and did.....nothing! When I questioned Kenneth about the presence of the police and their lack of action his only comment was: “they are useless, just absolutely useless!”

A few minutes later we were dropped off at our destination – the Uber cost for the trip: R58. (By all accounts the same trip in a metered taxi would have cost anything between R200 and R400). But, for all four of us the excursion had lost its glimmer and excitement. We went through the motions, wandered by the stalls, snacked here and there and just wanted to go home. The return trip back to the station and what might lie ahead weighed heavily on our minds. Barely two hours later, we were dropped off by Uber at the station - inside the station’s parking area and thankfully without incident this time. (Although our Uber driver again confirmed the risk to us and him). Within another 10 minutes we were blitzing our way back to Pretoria.

Afterwards we discussed this incident in the sanctity of our own home. My daughter confirmed that she had never been so frightened in her life. My son was disgusted by Johannesburg. My wife and I agreed that a border post with passport control at the Jukskei river suddenly seemed like a good idea.

My view is that Uber is generally not competition for the metered taxis. Take me for example – I have been ripped off so badly in the past by metered taxis, that taking a taxi is simply not on my menu any longer. So, I believe that the majority of Uber passengers are in a different market segment. Another example: if my wife or I get stuck and we can’t fetch a kid from the school, the kid takes Uber and I can follow the trip on my phone – definitely not competition for metered taxis. This experience has simply cemented my own perceptions of metered taxis in this country and has firmed up my resolve to rely on Uber. And of course the views and perceptions of my family and close friends have also been shaped by this incident.

But this violence by the metered taxi drivers (owners?) is actually bad for everybody. It is bad for tourism, it is bad for Johannesburg, it is bad for the Gautrain and above all it is bad for the JMPD and the SAPS. Something needs to be done by the

authorities and that something must start with acting against and preventing this illegal violence and intimidation by metered taxi drivers. When will we see licences of metered taxis being revoked because of this kind of senseless violence?