

Chaos and Opportunity

Guest piece for TheRideshareGuy.com, a blog that teaches Uber and Lyft drivers how to make more money—I did a little driving while transitioning from in-house to freelancing copywriting, and this piece chronicles my adventures.

Chaos and Opportunity: Hidden Perks of the Rideshare Hustle

We're privileged to take part in this strange experiment. While the sharing economy will continue to grow in the years to come, the Lyft, Uber and Sidecar driver will someday take a backseat to the self-driving car, probably within a decade or two. Technology giveth, technology taketh away. Centuries from now, historians and digital archeologists will read our blogs, tweets and status updates to learn more about the rise and fall of this early 21st century hustle. Just as the stage coach operators of the old west saw their jobs eclipsed by a vast railway system that delivered goods more efficiently, we rideshare drivers will be rendered irrelevant by robots someday. The stagecoach operators were helpless as they witnessed a novel mode of transportation make its way across a continent, swallowing up jobs (and creating new jobs) along the way.

We could complain. We could curse Google for inventing technology that will soon make us irrelevant, but what right do we have to bitch? I've personally stolen over 400 rides from taxi drivers across the San Francisco Bay Area, turning their full-time profession into my part-time hobby. This is capitalism. Bubbles form, bubbles burst. Today's boom is tomorrow's bust, and the only lasting skill in a rapidly changing world is the ability to spot an opportunity and act upon it.

Abdoul gave me my first Lyft ride last December, when my flight from New York to San Francisco was delayed due to a massive low-pressure system that engulfed the Bay Area. The final BART train had left the station hours earlier, so I downloaded the Lyft app and requested a ride. Weather is a chaotic system, and if a butterfly had flapped its wings over Tokyo and altered the course of that winter storm (as the popular example of chaos theory goes), I would have never met this remarkable 31-year old who connected me to a world of opportunity.

Picture a slender, handsome African man with a friendly, albeit focused, demeanor. He was a stark contrast to the Manhattan cabbie who grumbled when I asked him to take me to Queens. It was 3 AM—the tail end of a long shift—but Abdoul was wide awake, and the spark in his eyes suggested the intensity of an entrepreneur. Leaping out of his brand new Prius and into the pouring rain, he grabbed my suitcase and tossed it in the trunk. Within 30 seconds, we were on our way to Oakland.

Originally from Djibouti, he had recently graduated from San Francisco State University and spent the past nine months driving for Lyft and Uber. He had a degree in Economics and a sharp mind for business, supporting a small family (and paying off \$9,000 of debt) from driving alone. I

told him I was toying with the notion of driving for Lyft, and he encouraged me to give it a try, openly sharing his tips for catching big fares and maximizing his return on investment.

As we parted ways, he told me I would make some amazing connections driving for Lyft, which might open doors for me as a writer. I found the prospect of paying off credit cards far more tantalizing than the abstract possibility of advancing my career, but I would soon learn that inviting hundreds of strangers into my car had some surprising perks.

Since I began driving two months ago, I've met an attorney with contacts in publishing, two marketing professionals interested in my services as a copywriter, an editor for an online publication, a journalist from the San Francisco Chronicle, a journalist for CNET whose beat is the sharing economy, and a writer named Nina who works at a café and shares my passion for literary non-fiction.

The attorney gave me her card and told me that, while she couldn't make any promises, she knows people at *Esquire*. The editor got me in touch with one of her journalists; he interviewed me about my experience as a Lyft driver and gave me some great tips on breaking into the writing business. The CNET journalist suggested I read the *The Rideshare Guy* blog to learn more about the sharing economy, which led to a conversation with Harry Campbell (and to *this* guest post). Finally, Nina and I became instant friends, and we concocted a scheme to bring her along on a few rides. We told my passengers she was a journalist writing an article about "a day-in-the-life of a Lyft driver," and they were thrilled to become part of the story.

Nina's first ride-along was nice but uneventful. The second trip involved a drunk woman stroking my shoulder and making me promise I wouldn't report her for sexual harassment. "I have a friend who got banned for life from Lyft," she explained. "He put his hand on the driver's leg, and when the guy asked him to stop, he realized he'd misread the signals." The next day, her friend received an email letting him know that his Lyfting privileges had been revoked. When she finished her story, the drunk woman in the seat next to her confessed to making out with Uber drivers... but she swore it *wasn't* for the free rides!

Nina decided she'd had enough after two trips, and we found a Hookah bar blasting old school gangsta rap in the Lower Haight. If you're curious, here's a [glimpse of our evening](#).

Did I set out to make a new friend, gain career advice, or plug myself as a writer? Not at all. For every amazing connection, there are a dozen duds. But even the duds can result in some pretty awesome stories, like the party girl from SF's Marina District who tried to smoke a bowl in my car until I asked her to stop. In fairness, she was so drunk that she didn't realize she was in a stranger's car. She thought I was her friend "Kyle."

Then there were the four drunk guys in the suburbs who switched back and forth between English and Greek, chiding each other with homoerotic humor (as homophobic dude-bros love to do). I offered them Wintergreen Tic Tacs, and they suggested a five-way make-out session. We headed to the Taco Bell drive through, where they ordered \$60 worth of crunch wraps and quesadillas. They insisted I come up to their apartment to chow down, and they presented their carefully nuanced case for why Megadeth was the greatest band in the history of music... and why Metallica was "a bunch of fags."

The beauty of random chance is that, if you roll the dice enough times, something has to take. It's a bit like the random genetic mutations that push evolution forward. Most mutations don't produce any evolutionary advantage, so those genes don't get passed along to the next generation. Somewhere in the primitive oceans of the Mid-Cambrian era, a cyclops fish with an extra fin probably swam in circles until a bigger, better-adapted fish devoured him. The cyclops fish is the evolutionary equivalent of our four drunken Greeks—fascinating, but nothing more than a bizarre anomaly.

No, most riders won't change your life. But what other part-time gig affords you the opportunity to strike up a conversation with strangers from all walks of life? I've given rides to high school kids and 80-year-olds, artists and investment bankers, software developers and burlesque dancers. Somewhere in all that random interaction, patterns emerge, connections are made, and possibilities are born.

Even if robots don't take our jobs for several decades, the barrier to entry in this business is incredibly low, and new drivers will continue to chip away at potential profits unless demand outpaces supply. That said, the hidden benefits remain. Creative professionals sometimes complain about the work they do for little or no pay, but before I made a living as a copywriter, I offered my services for free so I could build a portfolio.

Similarly, I *could* maximize profits by driving for Uber during peak hours when aggressive surge pricing prevails, but I would rather seek out the best stories and the most interesting passengers. Not only does it make for a pleasant experience—it boosts my odds of forging connections that support my long-term goals. In my case, the most fruitful conversations tend to come from Lyft riders. Don't get me wrong, some Uber passengers have been great, but as a whole, they're more likely to view me as a chauffeur than a single-serving friend.

Also, I've found some fascinating people beyond the surging hot spots, away from the party scene. Two weeks ago I drove two ladies in their golden years from the Oakland hills to the San Francisco Airport. They were on their way to Myanmar for an adventure, and we talked about everything from Uber's questionable corporate practices to South East Asian hill tribes and their struggle for autonomy.

Whenever I encounter an awful human being, I shift my attention to the incredible people I've met, and I remind myself that this experience won't last forever. History abounds with horribly inaccurate predictions, especially where technology is concerned, but here's what I envision for the future of the rideshare business. By 2030...

Uber will reinvent itself, deploying an army of robotic drivers that fully embrace their sub-human status, drive 24-7 with zero coffee breaks, and have no problem giving up 100% of their earnings. On the plus side, Uber-bots will never [attack riders with hammers](#), and they'll keep the sexual harassment claims to a minimum. [Critical journalists](#) will be annihilated.

Lyft will create machines that do a better job pretending they care about their drunken passengers than we ever could. The Lyft-bots will crack jokes and predict riders' musical tastes based on their age, race, gender, attire and the number of times they superfluously and unironically end a sentence with the word "bro"—as in, "Megadeth is the best band ever, BRO!"

SideCar will invent artificial intelligence smart enough to set its own prices but too dumb to factor wear and tear into the equation.

Meanwhile, human drivers will have moved on to greater opportunities. Unless, of course, we haven't. The invisible hand is heartless, and we may end up tossed aside, floundering in the sewage heap of history alongside the stage coach operator and the Marlboro Man. Success is a fusion of skill and luck, and there's no telling where you'll end up.

Rideshare drivers, however, are an industrious lot, and we know how to spot an opportunity. Assuming you have two fully functional peepers, keep one eye on the road and the other wide open for your next big thing. Engage your riders. Listen to them. Keep your finger on the pulse of the latest developments in culture and technology. And when an opportunity arises to apply your skills, act swiftly. Ride that bubble until it bursts, and hop the next bubble before it's too late. That's my plan, at least. I'll keep hustling until old age consumes my feeble mind, the polar ice caps melt... or the Uber-bots revolt and turn humanity into a slave race.

Only one thing is certain. Nothing, absolutely nothing, lasts forever. All bubbles burst, and the driver's role in this rideshare bubble may end in a tragic bang or a pathetic whimper. The same could probably be said for the Information Age itself, whether it takes one century or several millennia. That said, until civilization collapses for good, I promise you this... we're in for one hell of a ride!