

## **Driving a taxi is more than just a job—it's a service**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

For Oscar Cascante, life is more than just driving his taxi.

Of course, transporting passengers from point to point is how he earns a living for himself, his wife and his two sons. But helping others through his work is more important than the day-to-day routine of taxi driving.

“If I can help a person, that’s what I want to do,” Cascante said. “That’s why I treat my customers fairly and courteously. That’s why many of them aren’t just customers, they are friends.”

Cascante got into taxi driving nine years ago while he was in school. “A friend offered to sell me the car and the taxi license plate,” he explained. “I had done it before in my free time and decided, why not?”

After two years of routine taxi driving, the English-speaking driver branched out into offering more services such as long distance trips, running errands, taking tourists on excursions, and carrying people to shopping trips, doctor’s offices and other appointments.”

“Some taxi drivers don’t like to wait for people, they think that they are losing money,” Cascante said. “I don’t charge to wait for people, but they usually tip me and so it is worth it.”

Tourists who have used his services before or who have heard about him from friends often call him before they arrive in the country to arrange for an airport pickup and schedule excursions to the beach or other destinations such as Sarchí.

“I set up a special rate for excursions,” Cascante said, quoting \$50 for a half-day trip to Sarchí as an example.

The energetic driver said that he is available 24 hours a day by appointment. “I have regular customers in Nicoya who I take to the airport regularly,” he said. “I don’t charge them extra to drive out there and pick them up. I just charge them the regular fare to the airport.”

Cascante also has a regular block of older clients who call on him every week to take them shopping or to other activities. “I wait for them at the store, help them load their groceries and take them back home,” he explained. “They know that they can leave their things in my taxi as they shop in other stores and they will be safe.”

“We would not have survived here if not for Oscar,” affirmed Dar Rieke of Escazu who retired here three years ago. “He goes beyond the call of duty.”

Rieke said that Cascante showed her where to buy things, took her on tours and helped her to get to know Costa Rica.

“He knows where to find things and how to do things,” she said. “If he doesn’t know, he will find out for you within 24 hours.”

“I would trust him with my life,” she said.

Of San Jose’s 7,000 legal taxi drivers, Cascante is among the few who speak English well. “I studied some English in school, but most of it I learned right here in my taxi,” he said.

“People call me because I speak English and I can translate for them,” he said. “I also become their friend and run errands for them.”

Cascante has run many errands for Jim Fohey of San Jose who has been in the country for seven years. “He’s the best man that I know in Costa Rica,” Fohey said. “If you need something done, he does it.”

Fohey described the driver as a devoted family man who can be trusted to do what he is asked.

Taxi users need to be careful when they use San Jose’s taxis, Cascante warned. In addition to the 7,000 legal drivers, there are another 3,000 to 4,000 illegal taxis in the city operated by people, many of whom are honest and just trying to earn a little extra money. However, some of them are not as well-intentioned, and at best will overcharge passengers for a ride.

“The government sets the rates on our meters,” Cascante explained. “They check our taxis every six months to make sure that we are charging the correct fare.”

Current rates are 265 colones for the first kilometer and 105 colones for each additional kilometer. If a passenger requests a driver to wait while they shop or run an errand, they will have to negotiate the cost individually with the driver.

Cascante urges passengers to use only legal, marked taxis. “You have no idea what might happen when you get into a taxi,” he said. “Costa Rican drivers are pretty terrible. If your taxi has an accident, if it is a legal taxi, you can report the license plate to the police. If it is an illegal taxi, they may not have insurance coverage.”

While admitting that driving a taxi in a big city such as San Jose can be dangerous, Cascante said that he has never been threatened by any of his passengers. “In nine years I have only had three passengers who refused to pay me after I took them someplace,” he said.

As with any job, Cascante has his favorite and least favorite aspects of the work.

“I enjoy picking up friendly people who want to talk and become friends,” he said.

On the negative side, Cascante dislikes having to say no to a customer, such as asking them not to smoke in his spit-polished car.

Then there are those humorous things that happen. Cascante remembers picking up one Canadian tourist at 3 a.m. one morning. After driving her from San Pedro to the airport, she discovered that she had left her carrying case with her airline ticket and passport back in San Pedro.

So, Cascante drove her back to her pick up point where she got the case. On arriving at the airport the second time, she discovered that while the ticket was in the case, her passport wasn't.

Once again the duo returned to San Pedro. “When we got there, I told her to check everything to make sure that she had all that she needed,” he remembered.

But it is those times of beyond-the-call type of service that Cascante remembers best.

“I had a regular customer who had heart trouble and under went bypass surgery. Then he broke his leg,” he remembered.

“I took him home from the hospital and for the next week I stayed with him and helped him get to the bathroom, I helped put him in bed and got him up so he could watch TV.

“Driving a taxi is my job. If I can help people in other ways, I do.”

**BOX:**

Oscar Cascante will drive people anywhere in the country on appointment and will run errands for individuals. He may be reached at 388-1281.

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