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My Cab Driver in Jordan

Andrew Gaylord

*But because he wanted to justify himself, he said to Jesus,
“And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29)*

Often times I found that whatever I expected or prepared for when traveling in the Holy Land, very little ever went as planned. I was left in many situations where I could do nothing more than trust in people, as difficult as this seemed at some times and in some places.

My cab driver in Jordan, Salim, did not drive so much as wander down the road, never staying in one lane but sticking to the shortest route around corners. He always was smiling, honking “hello” at cabs we passed on the highway, and even stopping once in the middle of the desert to chat briefly with a passing friend. My inclination was to say something like, “These lane lines have a purpose!” or “Could you talk to your friend later, we have somewhere to be!” But I didn’t speak Arabic. And Salim didn’t speak any English. Well, I did know two words in Arabic: hello and thank you. And Salim knew maybe a few more words in English.

Salim and I met at the house of my first cab driver in Jordan, whose name I have forgotten. He had taken me from the Israeli border to his house in Aqaba for coffee, and I initially appreciated this friendly gesture to a visitor in his country. Upon entering the large steel front gate I discovered the house actually belonged to my driver’s older brother. And as I sat in this strange but comfortable living room, I found that I was unable to appreciate either the coffee I was served or the welcoming conversation. I was thinking instead of the price I might catch on the undoubtedly lucrative black market of American tourists in the region. I was rather shaken by this new experience of “hospitality” from cab drivers. But I had heard this might happen, so I tried to look natural as I said a prayer in my head.

When I was told to have another cup of coffee, that a new driver would be picking me up soon, as my first driver had to return to the border for another fare, my chest nearly exploded. As I made for the door I was calmly informed that another driver would indeed be coming soon and that as long as I was in their house I was like their brother. I gave them my trust, though somewhat unwillingly.

Shortly, Salim showed up in his new-looking cab. He was smiling. And it looked like these men might be telling the truth.

It was a two-and-a-half-hour ride from Aqaba on the Red Sea up to Petra where I was headed. Salim and I tried to communicate in many ways. First I tried speaking very loudly and clearly, “Where do you live?!” Then I tried hand motions (“I love this land”). Then I resorted to onomatopoeia (acting out a seat-belt motion with accompanying “click” noises, upon discovering the seatbelt was broken). We settled finally on pointing and smiling.

It was about 100 degrees outside and the AC was busted. Since I wasn’t used to the heat, I began to feel pretty lightheaded. Every ten minutes, Salim offered me a swig of water from a two-liter bottle before taking any himself. He simply gave me every reason to trust him, but I couldn’t bring myself to.

When he stopped the cab at a gas station in a small, desert town, I looked over and saw that we had plenty of gas. The thought passed through my mind that this is where he sells me off to a group of terrorists. He returned one minute later with two cans of pop, walked to my window and held them up for me to choose. I picked the orange, because I didn’t trust the local cola.

For the rest of the trip, he pointed out the beautiful sites as we passed and continued to keep me hydrated. He began to grow on me. In Petra, he brought me to a cheap and comfortable hostel, and he agreed to come back for me the next day at 3:00 (the kind Italian hostess acted as our translator).

The next day, strangely, our ride back to Aqaba felt like we were old friends. We both began the trip a little bit sulky from tiredness after a long, hot day, but after an hour we were again smiling and pointing out the windows. Salim made early use of what we had found to be a very effective means of communication, emerging from our first gas station with big eyes and a big bag of chili potato chips, two choco-banana bars, two tiny boxes of gum and two cans of orange drink. Road trips are universal, I suppose. He refused to accept any money for the snacks, though I tipped him well.

He stays in my mind, and I cannot tell you how much I learned from this man with whom I exchanged only two understandable words. †