



Kelly Taaffe

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Your Uber Has Arrived: Stories from the Driver's Seat — The Bold Italic — San Francisco



There it is again on the news: that familiar, fanatical voice talking about banning Muslims from the US. I pack the last few items in my suitcase, turn off the radio and hurry out to meet my Uber driver.

It's a pleasant trip to SFO. We talk about things: the weather, family and travel. And

about his gratitude for opportunities in the US after fleeing his home country as a refugee.

Wait, hold up. I got to thinking about all the faces that take us places around the Bay Area. Here are some of their stories:

Behrouz, 50

Now I'm headed to brunch in the Mission District. I hop in an Uber and start chatting about this cool article I'm writing, for which I'm interviewing drivers. Siri interrupts. I think she told him to turn left, but I'm not sure. She talks too damn fast.

"Very hard sometimes," Behrouz says. "No understand too much in English."

I toss a question or two his way. I'm also talking too damn fast. I'm just excited. He starts dialing out on his touch screen. Am I in trouble? There's a voice on the other end and an exchange in Farsi. Behrouz gives me a grin and a thumbs-up through the rearview mirror.

The voice is that of Josh, 21, Behrouz's son, who explains that his father moved from Iran nine years ago to give his children an education in the United States. Behrouz currently lives in San Jose and juggles Uber driving with college courses and a job at Target.

"Most of the time, he just drives, and he can't respond to anything," Josh explains.

"Because of the [lack of] communication, he can't make a relationship with his clients. Sometimes they might talk about their life stories, and my dad can't really respond. It's kind of difficult for him, but he really enjoys driving and meeting new people."

"Other times, people are drunk or smell like marijuana, and they get angry at my dad,

like, ‘Why can’t he respond back to me?’ When he drops them off, they give him one star. But my dad always smiles at people and lets them know he did his best, and then gives them five stars. People are different—some are smiling and they laugh, and some are not, but my dad says you should count everybody as equals.”

After Josh hangs up, Behrouz gives me another thumbs-up.

“Me, I see everybody nice,” he says. “Maybe somebody crazy, but I’m seeing everybody nice. Everybody nice, everybody good. Somebody coming, somebody go. Every day, nice day. Help somebody.”

He smiles and tells me that I am amazing because I spoke to him. My inner journalist feels all warm and fuzzy—and gets giddy about expanding my sample size.



Moh, 37

Moh is a car salesman who drives to the city from Sacramento for part-time shifts. He came to the States in 2010 after spending time in Germany, Poland, Russia, Turkey, India and other places. He is fluent in seven languages and says Uber helped him transition here.

“When I arrived, I just knew ‘yes’ and ‘no,’” he says. “I remember the officer who stamped my passport raised his hand to me and said, ‘Congratulations, sir, and welcome.’ I was thinking, ‘What is he saying? I will just say yes, because ‘yes’ is good.’ That’s why if my rider is in a good mood, I always talk with them. My English has developed a little bit because of it.”

His rides aren’t without some challenging moments.

“Sometimes they talk to you as an item, not as another person,” he says, recounting one instance. “The rider was asking me, ‘How’s your family? How many kids?’ And I thought I could ask him about himself as well. I was being really respectful. It’s in my blood to be respectful to elders. He says, ‘I use you when I need a car.’ And I said, ‘Correct your sentence: you are not using me; you are using my car.’ My English isn’t good, but I gathered something from that.”

“I’ve had people who gave me a bad review based on my name,” he continues, remembering one man who gave him a low-star rating. The following day, Moh happened to pick up that customer’s wife at the same location. She cried when Moh inquired about the reason behind the rating.

“What’s included in Uber? On-time pickup, on-time drop-off, a nice, clean car and a safe trip,” he says. “The driver picks you up right in front of your feet, offers you gum, charger, water and what else? A lap dance? No, that’s it. You need my service, not my

last name.”

But Moh says he has seen the full spectrum of passenger demeanors. One rider, he said, was so satisfied with his service that he wanted Moh to keep his pay meter on for the two-hour drive back to his starting point.





Andrea, 50

Andrea is from San Jose and works in security. She has driven with Uber for about a year and declined to be photographed for this article. She has shared car rides with the likes of the San Jose Sharks, the San Francisco 49ers and a performer for Disney on Ice.

“You get to go to a lot of places where you normally wouldn’t get to go,” she says. “But I don’t work the night scene. There’s no telling what you will get. That’s when all the mess goes down.”

Jose, 31

Jose is a San Francisco resident from Nicaragua and is six months in at Uber. He works in the kitchen at a senior community center.

“I meet lots of different people,” he says. “Most are happy. It is a little difficult for the language because I speak Spanish.”

Jose also meets some riders—including me—who make an honest attempt to communicate with him in his native language. And those kinds of interactions, he says,

are pretty great.





Photos courtesy of Kelly Taaffe.



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