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CONFESIONS OF A CABBIE

London taxi drivers have a knowledge of the city that's second to none. Gary Mankelov, a cabbie for 25 years, shares his secrets

WORDS JENNY ROWE

Inside “The Blue Book” is all 320 of the “runs” that we have to learn: the quickest route between any two points within a six-mile radius of Charing Cross

How do you remember the road map of such a huge, complex city?
I learnt most of The Knowledge parrot-fashion, but I also made sure I got into the city to learn the routes in practice. The best way is to do this on a moped. It's cheaper, and it also means you start to develop a working knowledge. So you know not only the main, quick routes but have inside knowledge on alternative routes when roadworks get in the way, for example.

This page, top to bottom: Gary and his cab take a break in front of Tower Bridge and the Thames; Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster at night as seen from Waterloo Bridge

What would we be surprised to learn about London black cab drivers?
We're actually called Hackney Carriage Drivers – that's the official term anyway. Carriages were originally an ostentatious way of getting around. They were horse-drawn by the hireable ‘Hackney’ breed, who were famed for their high leg lift and ability to trot long distances. It's thought that they were so-called because Hackney, now in east London, was once a rural area where the horses were put to pasture in the 12th century.

Opening page: Gary Mankelow, London cabbie and city tour guide

The modern-day Hackney carriages are much more efficient, but they're still a symbol of prestige. Hackney carriages have been working London for 450 years, ever since Cromwell set up the Fellowship of Master Hackney Carriages by Act of Parliament after the Civil War in 1654. This was when taxi driving first became a profession. This makes the licensed taxi trade the oldest regulated public transport system in the world.

Any top tips for a tourist on a tight schedule?

Walk as much as you can and don't forget to look around you. There is so much history to take in. One look at a building could tell you who built it. If you spot pineapples outside it could be that whoever built it had made his money from trading them. Pineapples became a symbol ▶



PHOTOS: © ROBERT CRACKNELL 07/CLASSIC/ALAMY PORTRAITS: DIANA JARVIS

Your black cab driver might be the first person you meet when you arrive in London. Though a chirpy cockney accent and friendly welcome are commonplace, flawless knowledge of their home city is a given.

Gary Mankelow, a London tour guide and black cabbie for 25 years, tells us what it takes to be a driver in one of the world's largest cities and spills a few of the cabbies' best-kept secrets.

London's taxi service is famously reliable. How are the city's black cab drivers selected?

If you can stick at it, anyone can become a London cab driver, it just takes a lot of time and commitment. When I applied to Transport for London 25 years ago, I was given

what we know of as “The Blue Book”. This is what you need to pass The Knowledge – the test that has challenged prospective London cabbies for over 150 years.

Inside “The Blue Book” is all 320 of the “runs” that we have to learn: the quickest route between any two points within a six-mile radius of Charing Cross. You need to learn all of these routes, plus all the roads and landmarks within a quarter-mile radius of the start and end points of each route.

The exams are called “appearances” and the time between each one gets progressively shorter, starting from a 56-day gap until you have only 7 days to learn the routes before being tested by your examiner. Then you have to learn the suburban routes – anything within the M25 counts. It usually takes three to four years, but I have friends who took seven!





From top to bottom: Trooping the Colour at The Mall; golden pineapples crown the towers of St Paul's Cathedral; Dragon statues guard the entrances of the City



of wealth. Christopher Wren even picked this spiky fruit to be the crowning feature of each of the towers of St Paul's Cathedral.

If you see a window that has been bricked up, you could make a fair guess that it was blocked during Queen Anne's reign, when a tax was levied on windows and many people boarded theirs up to make savings. This is actually where the saying "daylight robbery" came from. The city is full of history and stories if you keep your eyes peeled.

What London sight is worth taking a detour for?

Waterloo Bridge at night. The view is the best the city has to offer. You can almost imagine Peter Pan and his crew flying past the illuminated face of Big Ben. A drive up Constitution Hill to take in Buckingham Palace is also a must.

What is the strangest thing you've been asked?

"Does the Queen live at Number 10 Downing Street?" Some people don't know London that well, and you really have to go back to square one. You also get those who think they know London, but don't. It's harder to help them. Plus, it took me a while to learn what Americans meant when they said they wanted to drive to somewhere "a few blocks" away. I've got the measure of that now.

What do you dread being asked?

Often someone will hail a cab only to be driven 50 yards to their destination just so they can be seen to arrive in style. They'll get as close as they can on foot and using the tube or buses.

Favourite time of year in London and why?

Christmas. Everyone is dressed up and so much happier to be here.

Most underrated attraction in London?

The City of London. People might think that the financial and commercial centre of the city is boring, or they might be confused about its name. The City is also called the Square Mile, which has its origins in the fortified Roman settlement of Londinium that occupied one square mile within its walls. Today, iron dragons in the street mark its boundaries from Temple and the Tower of London on the River Thames to Chancery Lane in the west and Liverpool Street in the east. You can see the more modern monuments of the Gherkin, the Cheesegrater and the Walkie-Talkie here too. Thousands of years of history in one place.

If a tourist wants to experience London at its best and most British, what should they do?

Nobody does parades better than us. When it's summer and a lovely sunny day, go to The Mall and Horse Guards Parade. This is where you can watch the Household Division's Beating Retreat [10-11 June], a spectacular evening pageant of music and military precision drill, including horses, cannon and fireworks. This precedes Trooping the Colour [13 June], the Queen's official birthday parade, a few days later.

And if it's pouring with rain?

Quite likely... In that case, take a tour in my cab! **B**

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