

Matatus Blog

Driving in the streets of Nairobi is a nightmare. But the more you do it, the more 'normal' it becomes to the point that when you go on home leave, you transform yourself into a nightmare to other civilized drivers. After living for three years in Nairobi I have become a fierce driver myself. When I go back to the US and rent a car I risk ending up in jail every time I hit the road.

In Nairobi, there are potholes the size of baby pools. These are particularly dangerous during the rainy season when they are filled with water and are thus camouflaged until you hit one of them and the painful thump that your car makes is a scream of agony. That is when you cringe, swear out loud, damn the lack of accountability and continue on.

At night there are barely any street lights, darkness is thick and it is interrupted only by the high beams of cars coming the opposite way. This is a classic. The lights blind you and you are forced to slow down and look slightly to the side of the road to make sure your car does not veer into the ditch that marks the end of the rudimentary asphalt.

Then of course there are the carjackers, always a looming threat around here. Stories about which roads to avoid at night abound and they vary according to the latest rumor of an incident. It is always best to stick to the main roads, never take a shortcut after 9pm. It is also advisable to always be aware of who is driving behind you and in front of you and what safe places there are on the route you are on. This means knowing your landscape, where are the gas stations, malls and stretches of roads that are likely to be lit.

Finally, there are the *matatus*, the local minibuses that are the heartbeat of the city. Most of the times you hate them because they do not abide by the law and drive you insane, especially during traffic jams. *Matatu* drivers are arrogant. They feel entitled to cut the line, go on sidewalks, drive down the wrong side of the road, cut you off at roundabouts and endanger your life, along with those of the dozen people they carry.

Matatus are so wild and their behavior so outrageous that at the end of the day you end up loving them because they are a trademark of Kenya. They are also a mobile narrative of all that is hip in the country. Spray painted portraits are commonplace. Usually, they are music related: Puff Daddy, Alicia Keys and Black Eyed Pees.

However, since the post-election violence that rocked Kenya earlier this year, *matatu* art has taken a political slant. Portraits of Kofi Annan can be seen next to statements like "The Peacemaker" or "The Mediator." Lately, *matatus* have also taken a keen interest in the US elections. A few times, I have spotted a flattering portrait of Barack Obama whose origin is Kenyan. The image is a statement in itself and I can't help but smile and forgive all *matatu* drivers at once for their crazy behavior. After all, their political views and allegiance to the first black Presidential candidate in the US is, to say the least, inspiring.