

Despite reassuring messages

spread by films such as TAXI (1 and 3) it's worth knowing the peculiarities which apply to Marseille taxis before taking one.

THE METER

In other French cities the meter indicates the cost of the trip. Not in Marseille. The meter lists an approximate rack price before tax. For example, if you see 10 euros you must then expect airport charges along with those of railway stations, docks, marinas, hospitals, cemeteries, one-way streets, steep streets, cobbled streets, bus stops, metro stations, the Town Hall, the Préfecture, the social security and family allowance offices, unemployment assistance, employee assurance, wet weather, mistral, rainstorms etc. Don't try to discuss the way this tax is imposed: everything has been included. Then there's the suitcase tax along with bags, cumbersome objects, animals and children. It's calculated by number (or weight). There's also the night hours tax applied by the Swedish calendar where it's dark by two pm. And let's not forget the final forfeit, based on the following formula: muscular build of the client divided by his capacity to understand the cab driver's pigeon French over the number of passengers taller than 6ft 3in and weighing more than 200lb. So the real price for a 10 euros trip on the meter can easily be multiplied by five given the taxes described above.

THE TIP

Although tipping is not compulsory it's normally better to leave one. For an estimate of how much, watch the cabby. When he holds out his hand you start. When he says thanks (not often) get the hell out and look for a cash-dispenser to restock.

PAYMENT

Marseille taxis don't accept credit cards, cheques, or foreign currency apart from US dollars when ferrying home drunken American marines. Please have the correct money ready – taxis never offer change.

THE DESTINATION

It's quite unusual for a cab driver to agree off the top of his head to take you where you say you want to go. First up, the trip's too short. In this case his refusal is clean and precise. "Can't you walk there? It's about 15 metres." Next, it doesn't suit him. "No, I'm not going there". Then it's too far away for him. "Look, I'm a taxi. I'm not Concorde." Alternatively, the guy's looking for someone to cover the cost of his own journey home. "You're going where? The beach? Well, I'm going to Accates. That doesn't suit you? Why? You don't like Accates?" Our advice: run for it before Accates turns on you. Finally, the cab driver agrees to take you to your chosen destination. Watch out. Be very careful. Set up the two trestles you've not forgotten to bring with you, put the plank you have on them and produce your ordnance survey map. Being a soldier in uniform helps at this point. Turn to the driver, drumming the map with your fingers to counterpoint the suggestion. "Show us the route you intend to take." By then the driver has already left or (very occasionally) he agrees to sketch out the route on the map. This taxi is fine, except that you will pay dearly for the privilege (in all senses of the word).

BEHAVIOUR ON BOARD

Before trying to take a taxi, arm yourself with the following objects: a foreign-language newspaper; two incense sticks; a mobile phone; a Tibetan amulet. During the trip behave correctly and above all don't talk. If the driver chooses to address you reply simply "yes, no, I don't know". Should the driver start to comment on the journey, open the foreign newspaper to avoid taking part in the conversation. "Fucking Arabs, it's like Beirut here" (remember that if you were stupid enough to buy an Arabic newspaper you'll have to speak drivel). When the driver says "there's too many of them" or "Le Pen now" use your mobile caller to make him think someone's ringing you. Last suggestion: if you happen to be Arab, avoid taxis.

COMPLAINTS

When you have a problem take the taxi number and file your complaint to the Chief of Police. At the same time make an urgent call to an international removal service and remember to go ex-directory.

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