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Dear Reader,

Letter from Jamaica No. 16

Travels and a few travails in tremendously beautiful Jamaica

Today sees the 30th anniversary. For me, a big, uplifting event. The 13th March 1990. Exactly thirty days after Prisoner Mandela walked to freedom. For me, it was the day I received my initiation. To driving the roads of Jamaica.

The potential benefits of travelling here and there across the whole of Jamaica are enormous. Especially if you explore the many nooks and crannies, and don't simply head for the beach or the town you know so well. The feelings and smells in this tropical paradise are so incredible to behold that you just have to experience them to know. Most persons are wonderfully welcoming. Views from atop mountains and hills are spectacular, totally breath-taking. Away from the tourist beaches, natural unspoilt beauty abounds in the mountains, tropical forests and river valleys. Much unspoilt



tropical beauty, including trees and lush vegetation together with heavenly smells. A variety of old, beguiling buildings and newer, modern buildings tell stories that add to the vast richness of the visitor's experience. Without a functioning passenger railway, road travel offers one of the best means of encountering the truly remarkable natural phenomena that Jamaica has to offer.

When I first arrived in Jamaica, there were of course many fewer cars on the road than nowadays. Hurricane Gilbert was not long gone, so the roads were even more "mashed up" than now.

My initiation was aided, or sometimes hindered, by a Ford Anglia. A sturdy little workhorse that carried the seven church-goers who begged a ride one Sunday evening in Duanvale, Trelawny. Quite how on another day the already old and decrepit vehicle managed to cope with sand, cement, chicken feed and two chunky passengers I'll never know, though I suspect the jiggling around that transpired was not a dance of joy. I do know, however, that when the brakes failed going down the long, steep and winding Fern Gully I had to think quite quickly. And not quite take in all that green and pleasant land and natural, idyllic damp smells. Not that time, anyway.



Old British cars seemed to live longer on the streets of Jamaica than on the streets of Jarrow. They certainly out-numbered the Americans and Japanese. Now, Toyota's Yaris and Corolla are everywhere, leading the enormous flock of Japanese vehicles.

Look at the number of cars now compared to 1990. 2.30pm in mid-town Kingston is like evening in London before the congestion charge. Yet in 1990, despite my searching everywhere, Kingston seemed to have the island's one and only set of traffic lights – though perhaps I could have searched a little harder. Now, however, the 15km drive

from Lilliput to the Sangster International Airport in Montego Bay will see you pass through fourteen sets of traffic lights! Okay, there are many more hotels, as well as vastly more road vehicles.

For some reason, the 1990 driver hadn't learnt to speak – nor glare. The car's horn warned persons and animals to look out. Simple, nothing else. Now, we have to know the difference between two short honks, one short one, a long one and maybe three shorts. Headlights also speak, though definitely not patois nor English. Painful, however, is the constant glare of headlights at night-time – no matter how narrow the road, it's the one time you really need sunglasses. And 95% engage, man and woman.

Certainly, behaviour on roads across the world has worsened a lot. Many persons have become more individualistic, concerned only for their own comfort, safety and time. And yet. Survival on Jamaica's roads really does take that little bit extra effort. Odd, really, when most of those persons in Jamaica (mostly men) have no concern for time across the remainder of life. They will race from traffic light to traffic light. They will overtake or undertake as many other motorists as they can. They will perform various unanticipated manoeuvres along the way.

Many persons do not seem to think much about how their own behaviour may impact others. Not least through time penalties they inadvertently create. Someone forcing their way out of a side road instead of waiting for the one vehicle to pass. Okay, that happens in Britain and elsewhere; but often in Jamaica it feels like just a little too much effort is being expended. Too keen to get going. At the opposite extreme is the person who barely ever gets going, but drives incredibly slowly in the outside lane of a dual-carriageway like Mandela Highway and delays tens or hundreds of other motorists. A driver on a cell phone can cause bigger problems, not least at high speed. Overtaking on blind bends can cost lots of time and, sometimes, life itself.

All that said, some practices are far better than those in other countries. As just one example, there's hardly any tailgating – “dem jus squeeze a pas”. And there's not the aggressive reprimanding of others' driving we see in many places. Jamaica, no problem!

Even so, the risks some take with lives – theirs, yours and others' – can be breath-taking. Not just from straightforward overtaking. Nothing so simple. If you wait longer than a nano-second when turning right off a main road some persons will overtake you. On the opposite carriageway! No matter what the delay or risk to the on-coming traffic. Similarly when turning right on to a main road, you may be passed on the left by a fellow motorist also turning right. Get to a busy cross-roads without traffic lights and

you'd better look out. Even if you think you are on the main road. Lots of honking, most definitely not saying "thank you".

Back to that cautious, unduly slow driver, often of the vehicle in pristine condition. It takes two to have an accident, so they usually escape. But someone else may well cop it when the exasperated driver is squeezing past their lovely vehicle.

Many a dog cops it, too. Roadkill in Britain is mostly badgers, foxes and smaller animals. In Jamaica, it's dogs, goats and the occasional pig. Sometimes humans, too. Despite repeated efforts by the government, road deaths rose to 435 in 2019, far exceeding the annual target of fewer than 300 - a target last achieved in 2012. Men represented around 85% of total fatalities. At around 0.015 per cent of the population, the death rate per capita looks like being five times higher than Britain's 0.003 per cent.

To complicate matters, many pedestrians and cyclists don't help. In some towns, the car may as well not have been invented for all that the pedestrian cares. Turning on a right-filter at traffic lights in Spanish Town, I was badly cussed by a lady who believed she had the right to alight the pavement and force me to stop mid-turn, mid-road. Clearly to many pedestrians, foot traffic came long before the motorised sort, thereby accruing special exemption from government rules designed to facilitate smooth movement for all.

The behaviour of cyclists can prove rather amazing to the uninitiated eye. When did you last see one on the appropriate side of the road? Or, not on the pavement? Or, with lights on at night? Funniest of all for me is the magnetic appeal of the zebra crossing to the cyclist...to get from one pavement to the other! The cyclist carrying a tree on the tolled motorway comes a close second - travelling in a contra-flow direction on the hard shoulder!

And then there is the lorry. Driving behaviour is usually relatively fair. But adherence to weight-loadings leaves rather a lot to be desired. Very often a truck will be twice or more overladen - or at least seem to be so! Most road users can detect this simply by watching how the vehicle struggles up a modest incline. Imagine being stuck behind such a truck while it scales mounts Diablo and Rosser, whether via the old A1 route or via the new T3 motorway. Proceeding rather like an incompetent mountaineer, or one wearing heavy lead boots! Not only can enormous time penalties be imposed on other road users but the damage to the road surface is immense. Irrespective of the tropical downpour, it's no wonder Jamaica's roads are plagued by enormous potholes!



In 1990 I don't ever remember coming across extortion and bribery on the road. But following prolonged rain some years ago, St John's Road near Spanish Town was reduced to a single lane. A few persons seized the chance to approach every driver in the line to seek funds "for repair of the road". A most unlikely use for any funds raised, I'm sure. But those persons were clearly entrepreneurs or gangsters – or both.

The police were not obviously present. But I have of course witnessed their enterprising ways. Many times! In 1990 they examined my documents a few times, but always as a matter of routine, quickly and efficiently. Some years later, I was stopped for speeding. I held up my hands, content to be booked. But one of the officers just kept wandering around the car, checking said documents again and again. Loitering with intent. After 15 minutes, he let me go on my merry way, with a warning to watch the clock - and with my wallet intact. Surprisingly, he did not read me the line too oft recited by so many officers: "left or right". Left or right? Simple: "leave me some money or I write you a ticket".

Then there was the time I went the wrong way up a street in downtown Kingston. For this most serious of offences, the armed officer knew I would have to spend the next day in court to receive my hefty fine and my stack of penalty points. That was after he had accepted that "dem a tief de sign". There was, however, an alternative that gradually emerged from the waters of the nearby harbour. If I could just slip into the quiet side road, he would be able to collect my fine, away from those prying phone cameras.

Probably my most entertaining encounter with the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) came as I approached central Spanish Town one Saturday a couple of years ago. Following an extensive examination of my documents during a routine motorist check,

the upshot turned out to be: “Well, I can find nothing wrong; but I beg you a refreshment.” Despite my familiarity with police officers, I was a little taken aback. Begging by a police officer; what next? Okay, it was 1pm and the day lacked cloud cover. And, okay, I accept that police pay can be difficult to live off in the early years. But unlike a motorist and a pedestrian a few minutes earlier, he had not even detected that my radiator had a serious leak. All ended in good humour, however, as I returned a little later with a repaired radiator. On spotting me, the officer chose to bow excessively as thanks for my generous J\$1000-worth (US\$7.50) of refreshment!

Rumour has it that the police own one-third of the island’s “route taxis” (or “red plates”), funded out of their hard-won earnings. Those citizens who need to get home quickly try to catch one of the police taxis, in the belief that they will not be stopped *en route*. Who knows where the truth lies – though corruption in the police does now seem to be improving, at least a little. Indeed, the well-respected former head of the army, Major General Antony Anderson, has been Commissioner of the JCF since 2018 and seems highly committed to making a real difference to police morale, attitudes and corruption, if not yet to police pay. More widely, the very recent appointment of former “Corruption Czar”, Greg Christie, as the new Executive Director of the Integrity Commission should help to bring real change to the extent of corruption in the public sector.

What is certainly not improving is the driving style of most route taxi drivers. They will pull over with no signal if they sniff a pedestrian who might just possibly be a passenger. They will reverse down the wrong side of the road to save a would-be passenger from having to walk an extra 10 metres. Just in case she should be snatched by a competitor. Certainly cut-throat competition, if not predatory behaviour! And never seeming to care that reversing down the wrong side of the road might cause considerable congestion to both flows of traffic. Let alone the added danger to pedestrians and other road users.

If you want to see cut-throat competition in action, look no farther than the Kitson Town to Spanish Town route. The red plates gather at the Kitson terminus – and then they’re off, like the Whacky Racers, overtaking each other to be first at Green Acres. Then desperately trying to be first at the school. Then struggling to cross the main road to be first in town – often leap-frogging their way up the 20-car line and squeezing over the narrow bridge. Before brushing the cyclist on the zebra crossing! Much honking, of course. But at least they no longer compete on who has the loudest muffler.

So, how can things get any better? Well, I’m sure we all have a part to play. We all need to make sure we do our best to show real respect for others. Respect their right to be

there. Respect their lives. Respect their time and property. And pedestrians, give the driver a little thought. It's no good simply saluting "respek!" all day long but not practising it. Freedom of the road comes with real responsibility.

The government has a big part to play. It is now trying to do so big time, through the Road Traffic Act of 2018, which addresses most if not all of the indiscretions that I mention herein. And many more, too. Now the big challenge is to ensure that the police enforce the new laws. Including by operating the new and real on-the-spot fines as just that. Not as a source of extra income for the individual officer. Police resourcing will be vital along with steps to eradicate police corruption. Cameras and technology are beginning to help. Serious prosecution of motorists with multiple infringement tickets (a few, mostly route taxi drivers, having recently been shown to have clocked some 1,000 (unpaid) tickets!) may help, too. Further action may be needed, such as steps to stop driving examiners needing back-handers to pass licence applicants, irrespective of their skills in driving.



The police can help very much, the more they can operate the law fairly, without seeking personal gain. Serious progress is now happening in certain ways. For example, when officers take control of traffic on the roads around central Kingston, motorist behaviour improves remarkably, such that a typical commuter can save 20-30 minutes (plus much stress) in their journey to work. From some seven spot checks of my paperwork in 2005, I encountered only three in 2009; and only one from six months spread across 2018 and 2019. Adding in evidence from other periods, I cannot help suspecting that periods of JLP government may coincide with rather less police interest

in my paperwork! But, forgive me. Such a spurious correlation must be insignificant; surely.

Nevertheless, whatever the government and the police can do to help, please do remember that we really can all make a difference. We can all dip those headlights when others are approaching. We can resist aggressive overtaking. Some can avoid going so slow that it drives others to their wits' end. We can all use those blinkers to signal our intentions. We can look and think ahead, anticipating better what others might do, so as better to react. We can resist the temptation to race to be first on that narrow bridge. We can all resist temptation and don't use that cellphone. By not racing to the next junction and then braking hard, we can save our own fuel and our brakes, and help to save the planet. Indeed, as Dervan Malcolm says at the end of each day's programme on Power 106 radio, "Remember, tomorrow is another opportunity to do better than today."

Let's not go around thinking "if only dem would stop dem bad driving". Let's all remember the Jamaica National Pledge¹. Let's all try to become the Jamaican Mandela, day in, day out. It's down to each and every one of us. Together we can begin to make a difference.

Stuart Taylor

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PS. If you enjoyed this Letter from Jamaica, please forward to friends - and encourage them to register by emailing me. Thanks, Stuart

Please also send me your comments.

¹* Jamaica National Pledge:

"Before God and all mankind, I pledge the love and loyalty of my heart, the wisdom and courage of my mind, the strength and vigour of my body in the service of my fellow citizens; I promise to stand up for Justice, Brotherhood and Peace, to work diligently and creatively, to think generously and honestly, so that Jamaica may, under God, increase in beauty, fellowship and prosperity, and play her part in advancing the welfare of the whole human race."