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Pink Taxis outside a casa in Puebla



sex drive

MEXICO'S PINK TAXIS GIVE WOMEN A RIDE ON THE SAFER SIDE

COTTON CANDY-COLORED taxis have been turning heads lately on the streets of Puebla, Mexico's fourth-largest city. In response to growing complaints of sexual harassment by male taxi drivers, the city began offering licensing and training in October to the privately owned Pink Taxi company, whose fleet of women-driven Chevys picks up female passengers only. Each Pink Taxi comes equipped with a GPS, a satellite tracking system, a panic button that alerts police in an emergency, and even a beauty kit. The company's aim is to make cab rides feel safer for Puebla's women, and while Pink Taxis can't solve the broader problem of harassment, passengers say they do provide a much-needed respite. "It's uncomfortable to ride with a man who looks at you like a sex object just because you're wearing a skirt," says 21-year-old passenger Joss Roco. "I felt calm and confident being driven by a woman."

Melissa Ayala, a 17-year-old student in Puebla, agrees. "Mexico is going through a difficult time; insecurity is part of our lives," she says. "The fact that these taxis can be found outside nightclubs makes our parents more comfortable. It was the first time I sat back and relaxed in a cab."

Rocio Nava, 35, one of the more than 60 women the company employs, says, "It gives women trust to know another woman is driving," adding that the cabs are so popular, they haven't been able to meet demand: of Puebla's 12,000 taxis, there are just 35 women-only cars, though the company is aiming to reach 300 this year. Nava is also glad to help dispel stereotypes. "We don't have to deal with the usual myths that women don't know how to drive," she says, citing her training, which included 180 hours of defensive driving, self-defense, first-aid, and basic mechanics like learning how to change a tire.

Some women's-rights activists have pointed out that painting a cab pink and putting a woman behind the wheel does not address the larger issue of sexual harassment, emphasizing that the city should do a better job weeding out harassers. Yet, in a country where machismo is still so commonplace, the service at least raises awareness and provides an alternative. And one undeniable benefit is the increase in employment opportunities for women in a traditionally male-dominated field. "I was eager to use Pink Taxi, not only because it's safer," says Ayala, "but also as a way to support other women who are trying to improve their economic situation." [LIZA MONROY]