

London's taxis are called black cabs. Their drivers are called cabbies. Cabbies will take you where you want to go by the shortest possible route. If they do not, you can report them to the police who will take away their licence.

One day last summer I took a black cab in London. On the glass between the driver and me I could see his licence and a green badge. I asked him what the green badge was.

"My green badge? It means I know all the street names in London so I can take you anywhere you want to go, not just in the centre, but in the suburbs too."

"How do you get a green badge? Is there a school for cabbies?"

"No, there isn't. You have to study by yourself. But there is a test and it is difficult. On average only six people out of every hundred pass."

"How do you memorize all the street names in London? You must have a memory like an elephant."

"I spent three months going round London on a motorbike, learning all the street names, one area at a time. You also have to remember which streets are one-way streets. When you are confident that you know them all, you apply to take the test. You appear before an examiner, and have an interview face to face. The examiner will be as rude as he can, but you've got to keep calm even if he starts shouting at you and calling you names. Cabbies must not only know every street in London, they must also be able to deal with all kinds of passengers. If you get angry when the examiner is rude, you fail."

"How long does it take to learn the whole of London?"

"That depends. Everyone is different. But after you have passed your test, you still have to attend an intensive one-week course to learn where all the tourist attractions are, all the theatres and museums and so on. Finally you take a special driving test. You mustn't brake suddenly—if you do, your passengers will fly out of their seats. You've got to be careful, watching what the other drivers on the road are doing. The examiners always try to trick you, asking you to do things you're not allowed to do. They tell you to stop on a corner of a street or on the top of a hill. Whatever they tell you to do, you mustn't break the law. You can only fail the test once. If you fail it twice, you'll never be a London cabbie."