

Venezuela's mototaxis push commuting to the edge

Motorcycle taxis offer a uniquely authentic view of life in Venezuela -- if you can bear to keep your eyes open.

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CARACAS - The motorcycle is headed for an impossibly narrow crack between two diesel-spewing buses, and to the untrained eyes it seems it's not going to make it.

But moments later it has emerged on the other side unscathed, the passenger's right knee only lightly grazing one of the buses.

Caracas, Venezuela's teeming, dissonant capital, is at its most authentic from the back of a ``mototaxi."

Weaving through traffic on two wheels can be hair-raising, but also exhilarating -- offering a portrait of the quirks, charms and thrills of living in Caracas.

William Espinoza, a mototaxi driver, began riding motorcycles without a license at age 11.

He has just parked in the middle of an intersection, ignoring a traffic cop and the cars whizzing by on both sides. "People here just don't know how to drive," he gripes, seemingly oblivious to the irony. Yet he has a point: Venezuela has its own disorderly driving code.

Drivers run red lights, rarely use blinkers, and generally ignore speed limits. Cars that miss an exit on a highway will simply reverse back to it.

The "motorizados," on scooters or full-size motorbikes, win the prize for brazenness: they charge the wrong way up one-way streets, roar onto sidewalks honking pedestrians aside, and mount entire families onto one scooter -- children tucked precariously between driver and handlebars.

But they are increasingly indispensable in a country whose booming oil economy has pushed car sales to record highs and clogged streets.

Heavily subsidized gasoline makes car travel exceedingly cheap, and transport officials say rush hour traffic has slowed to an average of 10 mph in Caracas.

With fares averaging about \$5, some mototaxi drivers are making a handsome living -- \$95 a day or more, they say -- as they rush businessmen in suits to appointments or housewives home with their groceries.

But some Venezuelans balk at the idea of taking mototaxis. Mototaxi crashes are frequent and deadly, they say.