

LICENSEE LEADERS



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MATOU LA NOTIS

Community

The New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission's (TLC) Licensee Leaders is a media program that highlights the stories and voices of TLC's community of drivers and other licensees, amplifying leadership in accessibility, customer service, and safe driving.



Licensee Leaders' monthly program engages the TLC community through long and short-form features. The series also recognizes citywide and national awareness months while celebrating the viewpoints of our licensees as they relate to culture and heritage, industry, and safety.

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TLC's Licensee Leaders recognizes and salutes New York City's taxi and for-hire vehicle (FHV) drivers and their commitment to a safer and more accessible NYC.

Drivers and other licensees represent the heart of a pivotal transportation industry in a city that stays in motion 24/7 constantly focused on progress.



To kick off our 2024 program, TLC met with Matoula Notis, a yellow taxi driver and road traffic safety leader who first started driving 25 years ago.

Sharing guidance for tourists and connecting with hails like Harvey Keitel, Notis is a high-spirited storyteller who goes the extra mile for passengers while representing her city one taxi ride at a time.

INTRODUCTION



Driver Spotlight

Matoula Notis

TLC: In your opinion, why is it important to recognize safe driving?

MN: Because lives are important. That includes drivers and passengers. We have to make sure no one is hurt.

TLC: When did you first start driving a yellow taxi?

MN: I first joined the industry in 1999. I worked during the day and

went to school at night to study medical coding, which I still do part-time.

Before that, I used to work for Estee Lauder. I was traveling for them for twelve years. Eventually, I got tired of the traveling and had a child.

I was coming out of Saks Fifth Avenue one day and I saw a woman driving a yellow cab. And I thought to myself, “You know what? I could do that.”

I love driving. I love people. And I’ll go back to school at night. That’s when I started.

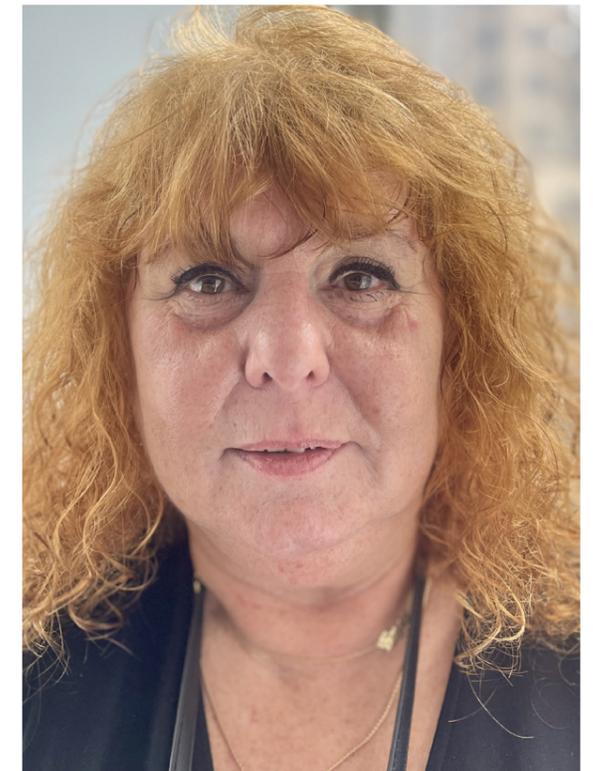
TLC: As a taxi driver, what are your thoughts on the average New Yorker?

MN: Driving my van, I had an older passenger. I thought she was in her late sixties. She climbed right in. I started a conversation with her. She tells me, “I walk everywhere. I retired, sold my house about 30 years ago, and now, I walk everywhere except for the occasional yellow cab.” She was 102 years old. [Laughs.] I love New York. She says, “I carry my own bags, I do everything for myself.” She was healthier than some twenty-year-olds.

New York is the best place. Even if you’re alone, you could take a walk, sit on a park bench, or take a cab somewhere.

TLC: Over the years, have you had any favorite hails?

MN: Another encounter was meeting the actor, Harvey Keitel. I picked him up and recognized him but could not remember his name. I said, “I know who you are, and I’ve seen everything. Everything you’ve ever done. But I have no idea what your name is.” [Laughs.] He was hysterical. He was like,



TLC’s Office of Community Affairs met Notis in Hudson Yards Manhattan

“I love that!” We were talking the whole way. We were stuck in traffic on the way to SoHo talking politics, but it was taking a good direction. At the end of the trip, he gets out and goes, “You know what? I’ve been living in New York for forty years and this is the best cab ride I’ve ever had.”

Others I’ve had have been Ron Howard, Alec Baldwin, and all these different people. But it’s mostly the everyday people I love connecting with. I think that’s the best thing about driving a cab—the experience of meeting so many good people and the wonderful stories I’ve heard. It’s been an asset.



ACROSS THE THREE DAYS PER WEEK I DRIVE, I MIGHT CONDUCT AROUND TWENTY-FIVE TO THIRTY TRIPS PER DAY. SOMETIMES MORE, SOMETIMES LESS.



Notis shares advice with tourists and New Yorkers alike, from reasonable eats to free attractions



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...

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TLC: How do you prepare for a day of work?

MN: Early in the morning when I first come out to work, I drive around to see if there is any construction, street closures, or anything else going on. I listen to the news for updates.

From there, I'll know where there is construction, a street fair, or parade going on. And I'll know not to avoid those areas and take passengers another way.

You can get stuck in traffic for so long. And instead of having the passenger get annoyed, I try to strike up a conversation. I had someone who said, "I'm a psychiatrist." I responded, "You know what? I am too sometimes." [Laughs.] People lighten up that way. There are a lot of good people here.



A Jackson Heights resident, Notis typically chooses to work in Manhattan



Notis takes a lighthearted approach to engaging passengers

TLC: What do your passengers appreciate most about you?

MN: I don't know whether it's because I'm honest or... But sometimes a passenger wants to go somewhere that I know will take an hour due to traffic. So, I tell them, "I can take you there. But you'll be with me for a long time. Or I'll show you where to walk and it'll be cheaper." And they do that.

To me, the quicker I get you there. The more money I have an opportunity to make. So, am I going to keep someone in the cab for the meter to reach an astronomical rate just for one block? No, I'm not going to do that.



Originally licensed in 1999, Notis celebrates the history of NYC's yellow taxi

But then, I had a woman from California who I gave that advice to, and she didn't want to go. She goes, "I was walking down the street with my two daughters. I tripped, fell, and literally, my face landed in poo." She was laughing about it. She was like, "Thank god I didn't let my daughters put it on Instagram." She said she hurt her knee and didn't care if it took them two hours. So, I was like, "Okay, I'm just letting you know."

TLC: What do you feel makes NYC's yellow taxi so iconic?

MN: Come on! It's New York. It's in all the movies and has been around forever. Consider the movie *Taxi Driver*. Taxis are landmark and should never leave New York. Ever.

My daughter got married and do you know what she wanted as a car? A checkered cab. So, I went to this place that has cars for films and they had a checkered cab that's appeared in 200 movies. And that's what she used, instead of a limousine.

Hello! What's New York without a yellow cab? What's it without the Empire State Building? What's it without the hot dogs? It's original New York, to me.

Do you know how kids are when they get in a yellow cab? Especially my grandson. I could go out and buy them everything, but if I show up in a yellow cab, all kids act the same and ask a hundred questions.

They're so excited to be in a yellow cab. Do you think they're like that in an Uber? A yellow cab is exciting. The yellow cab is part of New York.

TLC: To drive a taxi, what is an important trait one should have?

MN: Patience. You have to be patient. People ask, "How do you stand this traffic? I could never sit in it." I come out in the morning, and I know that there's an 85% chance that there's going to be traffic. And if I let myself get stressed about it, it's not going to move the traffic. So, you have to be patient.

TLC: Is there something others might be surprised to learn about you?

MN: I'm pretty much an open book. When people say, "Can I ask you a personal question?" And I'm like, "Go ahead! I have nothing to hide." You can ask me anything.

TLC: How many trips do you conduct on average?

MN: Around 216 trips per month is average. Across the three days per week I drive, I might conduct around twenty-five to thirty trips per day. Sometimes more, sometimes less.

When a passenger gets in, I know the fastest way to their destination. I do. But I'll ask them, "Do you have a preference?" Because it might be somewhere they go every day. Nine times out of ten they feel comfortable with me getting them there. They say, "You take me how you think. We'll do the best we can." My goal is to get them there quickly, safely.

TLC: What challenges do you tend to encounter driving? How do you effectively respond to them?

MN: I picked up this one passenger on Lexington Avenue and she was going to Newark Airport. Her flight was leaving in fifty minutes to Egypt. She says, "I overslept." And I was like, "What do you mean you overslept?" She goes, "Do you think you can get me there in time?" I was like, "Look, I'm not going to lie to you. Do I think so? No. Because one, it's raining; and the traffic is ridiculous when it's

raining. Two, once you get there, I don't think there's another plane leaving for Cairo in the next couple of hours." She was laughing. I told her: "So, one, you should have never overslept. Because that's an important trip. And two, I will do the best I can." So, as I'm driving, I tell her, "Look, it's raining, it's windy—I bet your flight is being delayed. She looked it up and it was being delayed for an hour and a half. I said, "Now you will make it. I hope this is a lesson learned." [Laughs.] I was just trying to be honest.

So those are the challenges; sometimes passengers are in a hurry. And I don't want this person to miss their flight. Because I know what it's like! It stinks.

TLC: As a driver with a stand-out driving record, why do you think setting an example for others is so important?

MN: Because incidents don't happen when you're safe. You'll go home to your family and won't have to worry. When you're driving safe, you won't have to worry about your driver's license being taken away—along with your livelihood. It's a matter of safety for everybody. And it's no joke.

Growing up, my mother would say, "I'm going slow because I'm in a hurry." I never understood what she meant, but now, I always think of her. Getting there a second faster is not going to make a difference.

You have to be super careful and alert. A part of being safe is looking at everything from those emerging on your side to people jaywalking.

TLC: Do you suggest passengers look both ways before exiting the vehicle to avoid issues with cyclists or other traffic?

MN: Oh, yes. I always mention it because if they are tourists, then they might not know to look and be aware of those things. I make sure they know to be careful—look both ways!

TLC: Do you remind passengers to wear their seatbelt before starting a trip?

MN: They can see that it's the law and I mention it to them. Especially for kids. When I encounter a parent who doesn't make sure their child is wearing their seatbelt, I tell them how a traffic situation can require that we brake suddenly, and that it could result in an impact with the partition if the seatbelt isn't on. I ask them to "put the seatbelt on for safety," and that "I'm all about the

seatbelt." We don't want anyone's child to break their nose hitting the partition due to a hard brake. You have to be safe.

I'm a grandmother now, so it's something I look out for. My grandson is seven years old. He's wonderful. He's the best thing in my life, along with my daughter. I say, "You were number one, but now you're number two now." [Laughs.]

TLC: What is something special about NYC you think not many are aware of?

MN: There are a lot of free things people can do with their children here, like free concerts. You just have to look for them.

I encounter families who come here on vacation in the summer and want to know where to bring their kids. They mention the museums, but kids don't want to go there, I don't care what people say. Unless they're seven or eight years old, you might go to the Intrepid. I try to give them ideas and activities. I tell them we have so many beautiful public parks—Domino Park, the Brooklyn Bridge Park.

Some people will say, "Oh, it's so expensive. What do you think we should do?" So, I tell them, "Go to the park!"



**I HAD SOMEONE WHO SAID, 'I'M A PSYCHIATRIST.'
I RESPONDED, 'YOU KNOW WHAT? I AM TOO SOMETIMES.'
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Greek-American cab enthusiast Notis details what she loves about the industry

There's even this one waterpark which is completely free. It's called Splash Lab. And it's amazing—I'm telling you, I had so much fun there. It's in Brooklyn. Where some might assume you go somewhere and have to spend \$100 per person.

Someone might say, "Oh I want to go to DUMBO." I might say, "You know what, take the water ferry." Not because I want to take business away. But look, you have to be realistic. People come here sometimes with two or three kids. They're paying a lot in a hotel. They're going to take cabs no matter what at night. Restaurant prices are ridiculous, unless you know where to go.

So, I tell them they can take the ferry for around \$2.75 going over, walk around there for the day, then to come back in a cab if it's late. You don't have to do it both ways. And they appreciate it.

You're helping them save money and they're realizing they can do something for free. There are reasonable restaurants, too. But if you go to Times Square, you're likely going to pay. Except something like Carmine's. It's still reasonable and it's family-style. Or Virgil's.

TLC: I'm sure they appreciate the advice you offer.

MN: Look, I love New York. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else in the world. But at some point, it gets ridiculously expensive. And you have to be compassionate with people that come here and want to see New York—I don't blame them, because it would be the one place I'd want to go—but you have to try to give them exposure to other things they can do which won't stress them out.

I'll never forget this passenger staying at the Waldorf Astoria. He got into the cab with his wife. And like I said, I talk to almost everyone. I ask them, "Are you all having a good time?" He says, "Yes, until I had that \$15 bowl of oatmeal. I could eat oatmeal for two months at my house for that." He was being comical, but serious. I was like, "Yes, I get it." I said, jokingly, "Because you decided to stay at the Waldorf Astoria." He's like, "You got a point there." [Laughs.]

TLC: Is it something you've become mindful of when traveling?

MN: When I go on vacation, wherever, I might hear, "That'll be five dollars," for a bacon sandwich. And I'm like, "Are you sure?" And they think that you're questioning them because you think it's too expensive.



Notis compares cost of living in NYC to other cities and how visitors react to it

Meanwhile, I think they're undercharging me [laughs]. Like, "Oh, that's all? Well, I'll take five!"

My family and I went to Greece in the summer. Has anyone ever gone to Greece? You've got to do it. I've been multiple times at this point. My daughter's an adventurer. I had to recuperate nine days when I got back [laughs].

So, we went out to what you might consider a five-star restaurant there. They had appetizers like

grilled octopus, whole fish, you know, not typically cheap things. And it was ninety euros for an entire meal for four of us, with drinks—but I don't drink though. Whereas if you were in NYC and ordered everything we did, you're looking at \$600 to \$700 minimum.

My daughter does professional hair and makeup, and they went to this Israeli restaurant on 10th Avenue. She goes, "It was a good vibe, but a couple of the people were vegetarians, so they ordered string beans."

An advocate for safety, Notis describes herself “all about the seatbelt”



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TAXI DRIVER!**

**TAXIS ARE A LANDMARK AND
SHOULD NEVER LEAVE NEW YORK.
EVER.**



She continues, “Mom. \$70 for an order of string beans.” There were five people, with two that were vegetarians, and no drinks, for \$1400. I was like, “You can go to the Bahamas with that for a week!” I said, “I don’t care what kind of vibe it is if somebody doesn’t jump out of that plate, come home, and clean my house too!” [Laughs.]

There’s another place called Quality Meats, a steakhouse, which can run \$4000 for a four-person dinner that includes Wagyu beef. I’m like, “I can go to Greece for two months!”

My daughter’s all about the food experience. Do you know who Bella Thorne is? She travels with her, like to Greece, for photo shoots and things like that. So, she works with people, and enjoys sharing dinner with others.

TLC: What are you looking forward to in the future?

MN: In my future? Maybe retire in Greece? In Crete. There are beaches, historical activities—anything you’d like to do, it has everything. The sand is pink; it’s gorgeous. You gotta go! Trust me, you’ll think of me.

The only thing is my grandson. I don’t want him far away from me. Maybe it could be six months there, six months here. I told my daughter; I’ll go to Greece for the summer, but if I could take [my grandson] with me.” She’s like “sure” because she wants him to have a Greek background. My daughter also speaks Greek fluently. You know, you keep the culture going. It’s important.

So, that’s where I see myself. Unless I can convince her to marry someone there. [Laughs.] But him, my grandson, I won’t leave. He tells me the other day, “You know what grandma? I have a plan.” I asked him what his plan was. He goes, “I’ll sleep one week at your house, and one week with my mom.” I said, “I think that’s a great plan, but I don’t think your mother will go for that.” We’re very close.

This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.

¡EN ESPAÑOL!



Matoula Notis

Introducción: Para iniciar nuestro programa del 2024, la TLC se reunió con Matoula Notis, una conductora de taxi amarillo y líder de seguridad vial que empezó a conducir hace 25 años. Notis, quien ofrece consejos para turistas y se relaciona con hails como Harvey Keitel, es una narradora de historias exultante que se desvive por los pasajeros y representa a su ciudad en cada viaje en taxi.

Conductora

Destacada

TAXI AMARILLO

TLC: ¿Cómo se prepara para un día de trabajo?

MN: A primera hora de la mañana cuando salgo a trabajar, me doy una vuelta para ver si hay obras de construcción, cierres de calles o cualquier otra cosa que esté pasando. Escucho las noticias para enterarme de novedades.

De esta forma puedo saber en dónde hay obras de construcción, una feria o un desfile. Y sabré que no debo evitar esas zonas y llevar a los pasajeros por otro camino.

Uno puede quedarse atascado en tráfico por mucho tiempo. Y en lugar de que el pasajero se enfade, intento entablar una conversación. Hubo alguien que me dijo: “Soy psiquiatra”. Le respondí: “¿Sabes qué? Yo también lo soy, a veces”. [Se ríe] De esta forma, la gente se anima. Hay muchas personas buenas aquí.

TLC: En promedio, ¿cuántos viajes realiza?

MN: En promedio, más o menos 216 viajes al mes. En los tres días de la semana que conduzco, puedo llegar a hacer entre 25 y 30 viajes al día. A veces más, a veces menos. Cuando se sube un pasajero, sé cuál es el camino más rápido para

llegar a su destino. Lo sé. Pero les pregunto: “¿Tiene alguna preferencia?”. Porque podría ser un lugar al que van todos los días. Nueve de cada diez veces se sienten cómodos con que yo los lleve allí. Dicen: “Llévame como tu creas. Lo haremos lo mejor que podamos”. Mi objetivo es llevarlos allí de forma rápida y segura.

TLC: Como conductora con un antecedente de conducción sobresaliente, ¿por qué cree que es tan importante dar ejemplo a los demás?

MN: Porque los accidentes no ocurren cuando estás seguro. Irás a casa con tu familia y no tendrás que preocuparte. Cuando conduces con seguridad, no tendrás que preocuparte de que te quiten la licencia de conducir, ni que te quiten tu sustento. Es una cuestión de seguridad para todos. Y no es ninguna broma.

De pequeña, mi madre decía: “Voy despacio porque tengo prisa”. Nunca entendí lo que quería decir, pero ahora siempre pienso en ella. Llegar un segundo más rápido no va a cambiar nada.

Tienes que ser muy cuidadoso y estar alerta. Parte de mantenerte seguro es mirar todo, desde los que salen por tu lado hasta la gente que cruza la calle imprudentemente.

THANK YOU

