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MIDDLE EAST

'Girl Taxi' Service Offers Haven to Beirut's Women

By Don Duncan

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BEIRUT -- In Beirut, you don't hail a cab, it hails you, with a raucous honk. The city's ubiquitous, banged-up Mercedes-Benz taxis -- with their hissing engines, torn upholstery and smoking drivers -- are icons in Lebanon.

But these days the city's transport staple is facing some serious competition from a growing army of female taxi drivers, dressed in stiff-collared white shirts, dark shades, pink ties and small pink flowers tucked into their flawlessly coiffed hair.

All of them drive for Banet Taxi, or "girl taxi" in Arabic. It is Lebanon's first cab service for women, by women. You can't miss the company's signature candy-pink cars.

"I chose pink because the first idea that comes to mind when you see pink is girls," says Nawal Fakhri, 45 years old, founder of Banet Taxi.

Ms. Fakhri cut her teeth in business running a pink- and pastel-hued beauty salon in east Beirut. The aesthetic legacy of that experience is clear in her current venture.

She launched Banet Taxi in March with just three cars and three drivers. Her fleet of late-model Peugeots has grown five-fold since then with enough drivers to provide 24-hour service. She is hoping to double her fleet this summer, to 24 cars.

The company is part of a regional trend. Entrepreneurs across the Middle East have recognized the business potential in offering secure transportation options for women. Banet Taxi follows on the heels of successful women-only transportation models in Dubai, Tehran and Cairo.

In Beirut, the growing company is a sign the private sector is succeeding where the politically volatile public sector fails.

"I like being one of the few female taxi drivers in Lebanon," says Maya Buhaidai, 34, as she takes a sharp turn on a windy road in the mountains overlooking Beirut. "And I like the work. It's easy, it's fun and I get to talk and laugh with my passengers."

As the sun sets, Ms. Buhaidai drives passenger Lamia Samaha, 37, from a suburb on the mountain slope to the busy central Beirut district of Hamra. Along the way, they chat about the news, TV shows and children.

"I am at ease because I am accompanied by a woman. I sometimes find men hard to handle," says Ms. Samaha, causing her and her driver to laugh heartily.



A pink Banet Taxi, exclusively serving female customers, pulls out into traffic on Hamra Street in Beirut. DON DUNCAN

But, as with many of the pink fleet's passengers, Ms. Samaha is also serious about her choice.

"One of my daughters is 15 years old and I send her in this taxi all the time, especially at night ... and not have to worry."

It is the promise of a safe and uneventful ride that attracts a wide range of female passengers: older women who want a quiet drive, young women out partying until late at night, and even preschoolers put in the cars by their

teachers.

Passengers' reasons for choosing Banet are based, in part, on their cultural and religious backgrounds. Beirut's population breaks down roughly into thirds, Christian, Sunni and Shiite. Conservative Muslim women might take Banet Taxi to accommodate rules against traveling with unknown men. Others just want to put comfort and safety first.

"I studied Lebanese society well and my first customer is the Lebanese woman," says Ms. Fakhri. "I am well aware that I could be making a lot more money with this if I also accepted male customers, but to me it is clear that in Lebanon, women need a service like this."

Lebanon has no shortage of women who are skittish about taking regular taxis. Reporting of sexual harassment remains low in a country with much taboo surrounding abuse and victimhood.

Yasmine Hajjar, a 23-year-old student in Beirut, says most of her female friends have a story about being harassed in a taxi. In one extreme example, she says she narrowly escaped being abducted by a taxi driver when she was 15 years old -- by pulling out her knife and holding it to the driver's throat.

"I think the pink taxis are a good thing," says Ms. Hajjar. "It's the safest way to go."

Banet Taxi is positioned to reap the benefits of the summer tourist season, an estimated \$1.7 billion industry, with about 30% of revenues coming from conservative Muslim visitors from Gulf states.

Once the summer bump in business is over, Ms. Fakhri expects demand for her fleet to remain as strong as it has been in her first quarter of business. That will put her on target to bring in at least \$200,000 in sales for 2009 -- a full return on her initial investment, she says.

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