

## Naming of Minivan Taxis Used for Public Transportation in the Caribbean

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### Abstract

Private minivans have come to be used to augment the public bus transportation system on larger islands or else to provide the only regular transportation on smaller islands. This minivan system has been exported by expatriate Caribbeans to some US towns, such as New York. As well similar systems have developed on other continents, as pointed out in a recent article on South Africa by Bertie Neethling. These minivans have been given names by their owners that are prominently painted on the vehicle or else displayed on the windshield. The names give an insight into local culture and tradition. I will deal mainly with the naming of such vehicles on St. Kitts and Nevis, but make some passing reference to other islands, such as Grenada and Carriacou.

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On many Caribbean islands a system of public transportation has evolved that makes use of privately owned mini-van buses, which seat anywhere from seven to fifteen passengers. On some of the smaller islands they are the only method of public transportation, while on others they supplement the regular bus service. The mini-van bus service does not run on a regular schedule and drivers can at any time decide that they have done enough driving for the day. Or else, they may take on only one well-paying tourist for the day.

These mini-van buses can be found on the English speaking islands as well as on the French speaking islands, where a mini-van bus known as *taxi communal*, or *taxi-co* for short. On Barbados for instance, there is a publicly owned bus system and a privately owned one, as well as a privately owned mini-van bus system. Vehicles from all three systems are distinctly painted and have their routes indicated. They all more or less ply the same routes. On St. Lucia (population about 150,000) one finds both route numbers and names on mini-van buses. On Grenada (population about 85,000) and on Carriacou (population about 5,000) (an island just north of Grenada and part of the state of Grenada), on Dominica (population 72,000), on St Vincent (population about 100,000), and on St. Kitts and Nevis for example we have only systems of privately owned mini-van buses. These vehicles are not distinctly painted, but they have distinct names or slogans chosen by their owners painted at the top of the front windshield or elsewhere on the body of the van. While one finds that regular taxis are driven on all islands by both men and women, I have only found relatively younger male drivers driving these mini-van buses.

I have collected names of these vans from several islands, but I only have what I believe is an almost complete listing from the islands of Nevis and St. Kitts. While these names serve primarily as an identification for potential passengers, they also give an indication of the main concerns of the younger, primarily male, generation on these islands and serve as an example of names in popular culture. These names don't only reflect the identity that a particular driver wishes to convey to his customers, but they also reflect the culture, interests and mores of the younger generation on a particular island.

The independent state of the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis is located in the northern Caribbean in the Leeward Islands and consists of the island of St. Kitts with a population of

approximately 30,000 and Nevis of about 10,000. St. Kitts has an area 169 km<sup>2</sup> and Nevis 93 km<sup>2</sup>. It is the smallest nation in the Americas both as far as population and area are concerned. The official language used on both islands is English.

If one looks at the names on the mini-van buses on the island of Nevis, such as *Charity, Dignity, Unity, Only Believe, I am blessed, Peacemaker*, one can detect an aura of religious devotion. Indeed, this is so; for instance, one notices remarkably fewer mini-van buses at certain hours on Sunday, as practically everyone on the island is at church. Yet, not all mini-van names on Nevis are of this type. A name like *Super Chic*, reminds one of the names that one would find on the neighbouring island of St. Kitts.

On St. Kitts, all bus routes start from the harbour front in Basseterre, the capital city (population 13,000). From here one can observe all of the mini-vans on the island. As the routes driven are not long, one can see all vehicles returning within an hour or so. The names fall into several categories. There are those names that are also seen on Nevis, stressing religion and virtues: *Humble, Hope and Peace, Honesty and Blessings*. Then there are the names that refer to the vehicle itself or the business of conducting a bus service: *Pay me then Vex me, Business, Gas Monkey, Faithful One, Sacrifice II* (probably referring to the fact that the driver had to sacrifice a lot to buy the vehicle, and it is already the second one he had to buy). The interesting thing however is that one notices the widespread prevalence of Jamaican youth slang and music, as well as Rastafarian culture. So one sees names such as *Rude Boy*, a name for a fancily dressed young man, a cool guy; or *Rolling Deep*, meaning that the person has a lot of friends and supporters who would come to his assistance: the message being “Don’t mess with me.” The word *Bingi* is a Rasta chant, calling on the powers of nature to destroy the wicked. Vehicles also have names of musicians or of popular songs, such as *Rogie*, a singer originally from Sierra Leone, but popular in Jamaica, one of his tunes being “Dead men don’t smoke marijuana.” *Mr. Shabba* refers to Shabby Banks, a Jamaican, who in one of his songs has a refrain “Cry Shabba”. The singer VyB2 Kartel performs songs that are known for their explicit sexual lyrics and the bus names *Proper Ting* and *Up 2 de Time* refer to these.

Another group of names finds its provenance from comic books, with supervillains alluded to with such names as *Mr. X, De Punisher* and *Street Angel*. However, one also finds quite curiously *Scooby-Doo*. Perhaps this is a nickname of the driver.

A large number of names are bragging, in your face, macho statements, often with sexual innuendo, such as *Fabulous, Vicious, Impressive, Island Spice, De King, Notorious, The Original, Roughest*, and *Mr. Humble* (meaning obviously that the driver is anything but humble).

If one takes a look at the names on Grenada in the southern Caribbean, one finds a similar influence of Jamaican music; for instance here the name *Assassin* is actually the name of a Jamaican rap artist and the name *Final assassin* refers to a rap song by Capleton. But one also has again the macho attitude displayed as one sees on St. Kitts with names such as *Menace, Obsessive, Slow me down* (meaning: I dare you to slow me down), *Take that and push it, Humble thyself* (Be humble in front of me). On the small island of Carriacou, there are only about a dozen mini-van buses and most of them carry the nickname of the driver, such as *Uncle Polo* and *Trinidad*. A lack of macho names may also reflect the fact that the drivers here are generally a bit older than on other islands, most of them being in their forties and fifties. In Dominica, there is often a reference to illegitimate business and money, or the lack of it, *Too legit to quit, Flash de Bobs*, but also *Humble African*, where the owner is probably again anything but humble.

How did the mini-van bus system arise? In the 1960s and 70s, the transportation system consisted mainly of flat-bed trucks with wooden benches installed on the loading platform. The buses were painted in distinct colours and people knew where they were going by the colour of the trucks. While there were mini-van models already in the 1960s and 1970s (such as the Volkswagen) the type of mini-van that we have now began to be produced in the 1980s, such as

in 1984 by Toyota (initially the Toyota van was not named; it received the name *Previa* in 1990) and Chrysler (Dodge *Caravan*; Plymouth *Voyager*), and in 1985, by GM (Chevrolet *Astro*) and Ford (Aerostar). Thus the mini-van bus system started to evolve in the 1980s, and it is interesting that it evolved not only in the Caribbean, but also in Central America as well as in Africa, particularly in South Africa (Neethling 2005), and Liberia. The advantage of the mini-vans over the trucks is obvious, they have a roof and one is protected against wind and rain, as well the educational system has improved in the various countries and more people can now read and tell by the names where the vehicles are going or can recognize the vans by the names on the windshield. The minivan system has also been exported to places, such as some cities in the United States, where some of them ply the streets of New York.

The names given to the mini-vans give an indication of what is important to the drivers and by extension they indicate what is considered important among the younger generation and their way of life: music, having or not having money; religion, comic book heroes. It is in short a manifestation of popular culture and it shows the observer what may be a difference in the outlook on the different islands. Popular culture changes over time and it will be interesting to observe if the trend in naming the mini-vans also follows any new trends. It is nevertheless an interesting introduction to present island culture

Visitors should not shy away from taking one of these shared taxis. One does not have to be afraid of getting on a bus that is named *Assassin*, as that is only a name of a musician. Taking these vehicles is an experience that should not be missed: being squeezed into a small van with seven to ten locals, having a young conductor hanging from an open door, and then making yourself known by banging on the side of the van, shouting that you would like to get off. If you are lucky you will not be too badly crushed by the articles that people are bringing home from the market.

## Appendix

### Names given to mini-van buses

St Lucia: Lucian Love.

St. Vincent: Crazy Man.

Carriacou: Uncle Polo; Trinidad.

Dominica: Self Defense; Roundabout; Too legit to quit; Flash de Bobs; White diamond; Humble African; Help yo Brother.

Grenada: Scare dem; Bite dem; Take that and push it; Too much a dem; Nothing yet; Slow me down; My enemy is not necessary; Assassin; Final assassin; Menace; Obsessive; Access; Humble they self.

Nevis: Peacemaker; I am blessed; Only Believe; Charity; Dignity; Unity; Dougie; De Bravo; Super Chic.

St. Kitts: Humble; Hope and Peace; Honesty; Destiny; Blessings;

Rude Boy; Rolling Deep; Seamossman;

Bingi; Rogie; Mr Shabba; Proper Ting; Up 2 de Time; Superdoc; Flava; Kervin;

Mr X; De Punisher; Street Angel; Scooby-Doo;

Fabulous; Vicious; Impressive; The Original; Island Spice; Notorious; De King; Roughest; Whaler; Mr Humble;

Street Freak; Street Racer; Fighting Cock; Knight; The Advocate; Street Fighter; Mr Flicks;

Faithful One; Sacrifice II; Gas Monkey; Pay me then Vex me; Business; Easy on Me; In Control; Kervill; Secret; Mangy; Saga; Skibo; Resilient; Executive; Survival; No Comment; Keno; On de Watch; Traitors Striving; Ms Nellie; One Love; Sexie Pet; Rough Times; OOH HO.

### Reference

Neethling, Bertie. 2005. A minibus by any other name, would it run as sweet? *Names*, 53 (March / June), 3-10

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