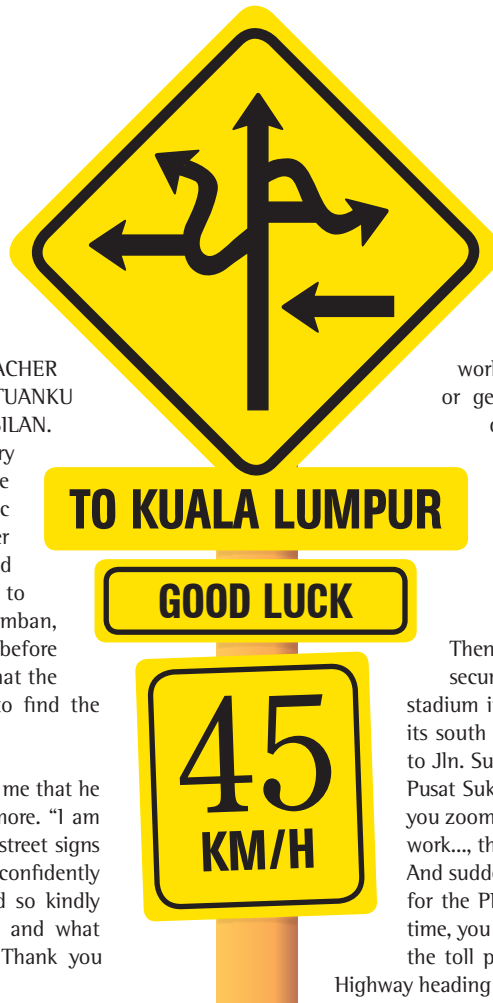


DRIVEN ROUND THE BEND

Chacko Vadaketh



DANIEL IS A SMART YOUNG PE TEACHER FROM SYDNEY AT THE KOLEJ TUANKU JAAFAR IN MANTIN, NEGERI SEMBILAN.

Where? You might well ask; as does every taxi driver when Daniel and his nubile expat colleagues (lucky KTJ kids!): exotic African-Aussie Belinda, the drama teacher and petite blonde Charlee, try and head home after a night out in KL. They have to explain that its between Nilai and Seremban, and swear that they can direct him there before they get a ride. It would be unthinkable that the taxi driver might have maps and offer to find the place for them.

Daniel is now buying a car, and was telling me that he won't be at the mercy of taxi drivers no more. "I am going to just drive around and follow the street signs and get to know the Klang Valley!" he confidently declared, as we had drinks after they had so kindly come to see me in "Aladdin" at KLPAC, and what a wonderful zany production that was. Thank you director Paul Loosely!

I did not wish to dampen Daniel's spirit but inwardly I thought, "Poor fellow, out of the frying pan and into the fire!"

The best way to explore our lush country blessed with beautiful roads is to just try and follow the equally attractive but far from unambiguous road signs, to wherever you wish to go: you will almost definitely end up in a host of places you never dreamt existed. Since Daniel and entourage come up to KL on Fridays or Saturdays, I reassured myself, they will at least have a whole weekend to find their way back home.

One of the first problems a new driver to Malaysia will find on taking to the streets is that street signs rarely tell you what road or highway you are on. If you are lucky they might tell you what highways you will get onto at the next exit, but they never state what you are on, so it becomes impossible to work out where you are, if you are well and truly lost. And quite often, the highway or street you are turning onto is also mysteriously left out. All you are told is you are heading to say Kuala Lumpur and/or Kuantan, maybe just Utara. And it's not unusual to find that there are several arrows all pointing in different directions which all indicate the same destination often, Kuala Lumpur, but no hint of what highways or streets that you will take to get there. This is particularly true when you leave the airport, there are many options for Kuala Lumpur and then a different arrow for KLCC, Ampang, Seremban and Johor, but not Kuala Lumpur!

If only there were indications of the highways coming up and the streets you are turing into, one could be so much more precise in

working out one's routes from street directories or getting instructions from someone and also quickly work out exactly where one is. Some new highways are seemingly kept secret, like the Ampang elevated highway and the newish Guthrie corridor. You could be metres from them, but unless you stumble across the actual exit for them, you would never know they existed.

Then the signs trick you into a false sense of security. You are rushing for a concert at the stadium in Bukit Jalil, after work from KL. You know its south of the city, so you get onto Tun Razak and to Jln. Sungei Besi, there are signs reassuring you that Pusat Sukan Nasional Bukit Jalil is straight ahead and you zoom along, well maybe not quite zoom if its after work..., thinking you are heading in the right direction. And suddenly; no more signs. As you head past the toll for the PLUS highway, Serdang and the concert start time, you begin to worry. With good cause: well before the toll plaza, you should have gone onto the Kesas

Highway heading toward Shah Alam, but while Shah Alam and even Kesas is well signposted, there is nothing to indicate that this is the way to get to Bukit Jalil. Once you do make that turn, there are signs, whose purpose seems only to congratulate you for having taken the correct exit!

The other way the powers that keep Malaysian drivers on edge is by frequently using only the Highway numbers, if and when they deign to indicate them. Everyone knows only of PLUS or LDP or AKLEH. Suddenly one is confronted with E1, E12 or E20. It is totally bewildering as no one talks about our expressways in terms of numbers, unlike say in the UK or the US. There really should be some decision made somewhere to stick to one or the other. If numbers are to be used, which makes sense, then the media, the highway operators etc, should only use these numbers and thereby get us information overloaded motorists used to them. Just to keep life more exciting, if and when the numbers are indicated, they will be in little yellow hexagons which are smaller and less easy to read than the street or town names, so by the time you realize that a certain exit leads to E5, it's too late!

And when you have realised you have shot past a crucial exit, sit back and enjoy the surroundings as the option to make a U-Turn won't happen for the next few kilometers. In the process you will have to pay tolls at least twice, being forced to get off the highway and then back on again.

Now the one place where everyone knows streets by numbers is PJ, but God help Daniel if he tries to navigate around KL's satellite town by finding a logical sequence in the numbering. But that's a whole other article.