

FEATURES



A traffic security officer stands on duty at an intersection in Pyongyang..



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DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION: PYONGYANG'S 'TRAFFIC LADIES'

Snapping their heads from side to side, marching into the roads in close-fitting blue uniforms and black heels, the "traffic ladies" who marshal vehicles at the intersections of Pyongyang are an emblematic image of the North Korean capital. Officially known as traffic security officers but universally referred to as traffic ladies, they are chosen for their looks in a society that remains traditionalist in many respects. They must leave the role if they marry, and have a finite shelf-life, with compulsory retirement looming at just 26.

The 300-odd ladies are unique to Pyongyang, which North Korean authorities are always keen to present in the best possible light despite their nuclear-armed country's impoverished status, and ensure a steady supply of photogenic young women who are the favorite subject of visiting tourists and journalists. "They are representing the capital city," explained a senior officer of the ministry of public security, which supervises traffic regulation. "That's why they are selected based on their appearance and physique." No age limit applies to their roughly 400 male counterparts - who tend to be stationed at roundabouts. The rules were because "normally, the women in our country marry at the age of 26 or 27", explained the officer, who did not want to be named. "Because the role is tough and difficult, they can only do the job when they are single."

Tough training

The traffic ladies were originally introduced in the 1980s, when vehicles were a rarity on the streets of Pyongyang and remained so for decades, giving rise to the surreal sight of them directing - with precision and energy - non-existent

cars on wide but deserted boulevards. As part of North Korea's security forces they hold officer ranks, and Senior Captain Ri Myong-Sim, 24, said: "I have to carry out each and every action with discipline and spirit." A seven-year veteran, she cuts an imposing presence in her high-peaked cap and white gloves.

Her "tough training" had involved "exhausting repetition" of the moves, she told AFP. "But every time I felt that, the thing that kept me going and drove me was the thought that our leader, who cares for only the happiness of our people all year long, was watching us work," she said, standing ramrod-straight at the Changjon crossroads in central Pyongyang. "So I could practice throughout the night and keep going on the next day without feeling tired at all." Ordinary North Koreans normally only express official sentiments when questioned by foreign media. An obelisk down the road proclaimed: "The Great President Kim Il-Sung and the Great Leader Kim Jong-Il will always be with us."

Great love

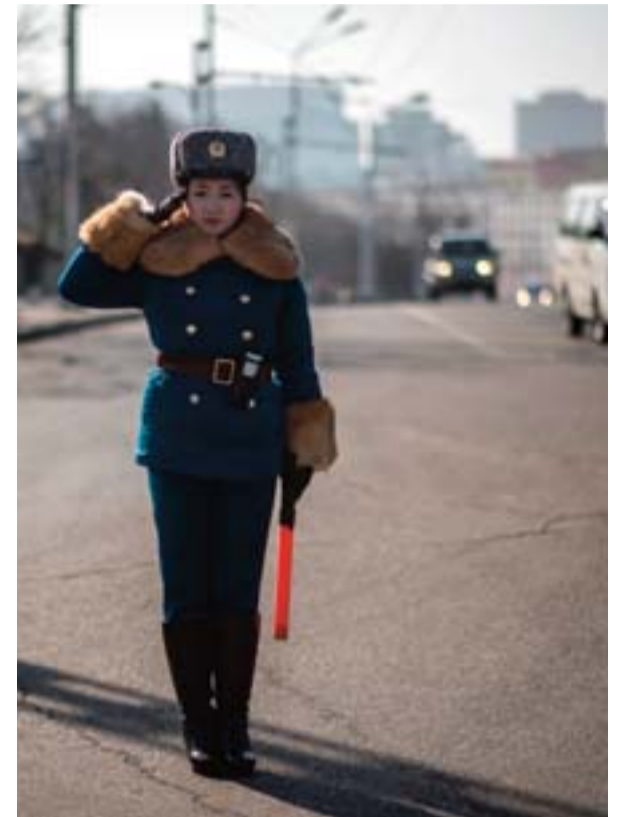
Vehicle numbers have increased in the capital in recent years as authorities quietly liberalize the economy, leading to growth despite United Nations sanctions imposed over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, although the North keeps most statistics secret and precise figures are not available. Traffic lights have been introduced at most intersections, but the ladies - who say they work an hour on, an hour off, although their feet can still get sore - have no fear of their blue uniforms being replaced by red, amber and green.

The lights "help the humans do their jobs more easily," said Ri. Their kit includes thick cotton coats for winter - when their breath condenses instantly in the bitter cold - flashing orange halters for night work, and sunscreen. "The great leader shows them endless care and love," the ministry officer said. "That's why they do their best in their efforts, to repay the great love of the great presidents and dear Respected Marshal Kim Jong-Un."

Second to none

The traffic ladies are "second to none" as a photo subject for tourists visiting Pyongyang, said Simon Cockerell, general manager of specialist travel agency Koryo Tours, who has been leading trips to North Korea for more than 15 years. "They appear to have the dual function of directing traffic and brightening up the streets of the capital," he said. "I don't believe there has been a tourist who has visited Pyongyang and not taken a photo of a traffic lady."

"I think it would be no exaggeration to call them iconic," he added - although they were "somewhat objectified" by visitors. With retirement ahead Senior Captain Ri is taking a training course to become a teacher. But she let the facade of discipline slip when asked if the focus was annoying. "We are so concentrated on doing our jobs we rarely notice the attention," she giggled. — AFP



A traffic security officer stands on duty at an intersection in Pyongyang.—AFP photos



A Premiere Padmini taxi used as a garbage vat is seen along a street in the Indian city of Mumbai.— AFP photos



Indian taxi driver Dawood Khan, 80, stands next to his Premiere Padmini taxi after dropping off a customer in Mumbai.



An Indian woman speaks on her mobile phone while walking past a Premiere Padmini taxi used as a garbage vat in Mumbai.



Indian taxi driver Dawood Khan, 80, drives his Premiere Padmini taxi along a street in Mumbai.

Mumbai's adored Padmini taxis near the end of the road

They were named after a legendary Indian queen and were synonymous with Mumbai for half a century but the last Premier Padmini taxis will soon embark on their final journey to the scrapyard. The compact black-and-yellow cabs, based on an Italian Fiat and often boasting elaborately patterned interiors, were once ubiquitous across the congested roads of India's financial capital and have featured in countless Bollywood movies.

Around 65,000 Padminis plied Mumbai at their peak in the mid-1990s but a gradual phasing out in favor of newer, more environmentally friendly vehicles has meant that today only some 300 splutter around and officials predict they will disappear completely next year. For many the passing of the Indian-built vehicle, a product of the Asian giant's closed economy of the 1960s and a classic, albeit now rusting, car which continues to enthral foreign tourists, will be the end of an unforgettable chapter in Mumbai's history. "It really is an iconic car because for so long it was the only vehicle used by taxi operators here. It must have been the largest fleet in the world," A. L. Quadros, a taxi union chief in Mumbai, told AFP.

The first Padminis, an Indian take on the Fiat 1100 Delight, rolled off production lines at the Premier Automobiles Limited factory in Mumbai, then called Bombay, in 1964 under an licensing agreement with the famous Italian car manufacturer. They were initially known as "Fiat taxis" before being renamed Padmini in 1973 after mythical Hindu queen Rani Padmini who legend has it lived during the 13th and 14th centuries.

Padmini v Ambassador

Mumbai authorities in the 1960s opted for the Padmini over the bulkier Hindustan Motors Ambassador - the taxi of choice in Delhi and Kolkata, which was the only other car widely available in India at the time - and their numbers increased exponentially during the '70s and '80s. "The Padmini was chosen because it was small and attractive. It was nice to drive and you could park it anywhere easily. It was comfortable and people liked it," said Quadros.

Not known for their speed or boot space, Padminis are characterized by their low ceilings, large gear stick to the left of the steering wheel and quirky silver-coloured door handles which require passengers to trickily lift up and push to get out. Today, many have colorful carpeted ceilings and seat covers while some boast bright, multi-colored neon lights which illuminate the inside of the



A Premiere Padmini taxi (center) is parked alongside other taxis outside a railway station in the Indian city of Mumbai.

cab at night. But they are also known for dodgy brakes, indicators that fail to work, doors that don't close properly and a tendency to let in water during Mumbai's four-month summer monsoon.

As Autocar India editor Hormazd Sorabjee points out they were hardly famous for being finely-tuned automobiles. "The welding was poor and sloppy. Even when it came out of the factory it was in terrible condition and you'd probably have to get it fixed. That's just how it was in India in those days," he told AFP, referring to the years before India's economy opened up in 1991.

Anti-pollution measures

Liberalization paved the way for the arrival of more spacious, reliable, comfortable and fuel-efficient vehicles such as Hyundai models. Numbers steadily declined and production of Padminis was stopped altogether in 2000. Their death knell was finally sounded in 2013 when the

government implemented an anti-pollution order banning cars more than 20 years old from Mumbai's roads. The number of Padminis has declined rapidly since and Quadros expects there will be none left on the roads by December 2018. Taxi driver Mukund Shukla, who has maneuvered his Padmini through Mumbai's hectic streets for 20 years, is sad about the prospect of his beloved vehicle being sold for scrap.

"This Padmini has given me company for two decades and I will miss it deeply," said the 47-year-old, who plans to take a bank loan to afford the 500,000-rupee (\$7,700) cost of a new taxi. But not everyone is upset about the Premier Padmini fading into history. Sorabjee said: "Modern cars are light years ahead in terms of technology. The Padmini had nothing going for it by the end, nostalgia apart." — AFP



Motorists ride past a Premiere Padmini taxi used as a garbage vat in the Indian city of Mumbai.



An Indian taxi driver drives his Premiere Padmini past the iconic UN Heritage building Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station in Mumbai.