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## **Is That a Tinge of Green on New York's Yellow Cabs?**

**By AUSTIN CONSIDINE**

LIKE many drivers, Israfil Islam is feeling the pinch of high gasoline prices. But for Mr. Islam and the thousands of New York taxi drivers whose incomes depend on driving as many miles as possible, the pain is especially acute.

"A year ago, we still used \$20 to \$30," he said, his speech, 22 years after arriving in New York, still tinged with the cadences of Bangladesh. "Now, it's more — now almost minimum \$40 to \$50 for gasoline every day."

But some days — when he is lucky enough to find himself behind the wheel of a [Ford Escape](#) S.U.V. hybrid taxi rather than a [Ford Crown Victoria](#) sedan — Mr. Islam saves up to \$15 over his 12-hour shift. The savings offered by the Escape's gasoline-electric powertrain are deeply appreciated, because in addition to the daily cost of leasing the cab, Mr. Islam pays for the gas he uses out of his pocket.

Cleaner air, not saving money, was the original motivation for introducing hybrids to the city's taxi fleet. The Taxi and Limousine Commission, under pressure from the City Council, approved six hybrid models for taxi service last fall. The first batch entered the fleet in November; there are now 27 hybrid taxis on city streets.

While the environmental rewards of an all-green taxi fleet may be far off in the future, an independent driver who owns a hybrid cab would benefit each time the tank is filled. At 36 m.p.g., the [E.P.A.](#) rating of a front-wheel-drive Escape Hybrid doubles the mileage of a Crown Victoria cab; with each one covering 64,600 miles a year on average, and nearly 13,000 taxis in the city, total gas savings would amount to tens of thousands of gallons each day.

The miles gained on each gallon in city driving would also help to offset the added cost of buying a hybrid — \$4,000 to \$5,000 more for an Escape than for a Crown Victoria, according to a Ford spokesman.

But it is less clear whether hybrids are a good investment for fleet owners. For example, the Escape Hybrid's durability in taxi duty is less well known, while the ubiquitous Crown Victoria is a proven workhorse.

Evgeny Friedman, who manages three taxi fleets in the city, including the one for which Mr. Islam drives, said saving gas was part of the hybrids' appeal. "As a fleet manager, I live under the theory: happy driver, happy public, happy fleet manager," Mr. Friedman said. "If the drivers are happy, I'm ecstatic."

Mr. Friedman's fleets, with about 650 cars in all, include 22 hybrid Escapes. The remainder of New York's hybrid taxis are two Lexus RX 400h's, two Toyota Highlanders and one [Toyota Prius](#), according to the taxi commission.

Matthew W. Daus, chairman of the commission, cited the discounted price of taxi medallions for hybrids — auctioned in 2004 at about \$170,000 less than the nearly \$400,000 that medallions have sold for — as one incentive for fleet owners to buy hybrids. [On Thursday, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg announced that 254 of the 308 medallions to be auctioned next month would be designated for hybrid and alternative-fuel cabs. The remaining 54 were for handicapped-accessible taxis. Mr. Daus had opposed an earlier City Council bill that would have required half the medallions to be set aside for such vehicles. A decision had not been made on whether the commission would offer another discount on hybrids, he said.] Mr. Daus also mentioned a one-time federal tax credit — \$650 to \$3,150, depending on the model — for increasing interest in hybrid taxis.

Mr. Friedman played down the appeal of those incentives. Since last fall he has added four hybrids to his fleet with full-price medallions, and noted that it was nearly impossible to qualify for the tax credit. Hybrid parts and maintenance, though more costly now, were more important reasons for Mr. Friedman's purchase of the Ford hybrids.

"If I have a problem, I know the dealer to take it to," he said. "I know the engineer to call at Ford. I know the regional guys that will help me track down parts if I need to."

Another attraction for Mr. Friedman was the Escape's four-cylinder engine, which is less powerful than the V-8 in a Crown Victoria. "If it's less aggressive, I have less accidents, I have less wear-and-tear," he said.

Drivers seem happy with the performance of the Escapes. Mr. Islam said that acceleration was not a problem and that the Escape's driver's seat was more comfortable than the Crown Victoria's. The biggest adjustment was the feel of the brake pedal, which activates the regenerative charging system to replenish the battery each time the cab slows down. In addition, the engine shuts itself off at stoplights to help save fuel.

Among the few customer complaints, Mr. Islam said, is the Escape's step-in height, which makes it difficult for some passengers to board. Another is legroom in the back seat, which is less spacious. Otherwise, Mr. Islam said, passengers love it. "The first time they ride in a hybrid, they ask a lot of questions. How's the hybrid? How's the gas?" he said.

Despite the enthusiasm of riders, it is unlikely they would wave off Crown Victorias while waiting for a hybrid the way riders held out for spacious Checkers in the 1980's. Charges for a ride in a hybrid are the same as those for conventional cabs.

There are some added costs to make the approved hybrid models suitable for taxi service. Bumper guards and running boards are added to the Escapes, and the dark-tinted side windows are replaced with clearer glass.

Because of the limited space in the rear seat, security partitions are not required (though on cars without the partitions, security cameras are added).

Mr. Daus of the taxi commission said he hoped the hybrid was the first step in the evolution of alternative-fuel taxis.

"With hybrids and other alternative fuels there's going to be survival of the fittest," he said. "No. 1, who's going to give you the best fuel efficiency for your bottom dollar? And No. 2, how is your vehicle going to perform 24 hours, 7 days a week as a cab on the streets of New York City?"

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