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Monday, April 16, 2007 / Updated Moscow Time

NEWS

Wednesday, February 28, 2007, Issue 3605, Page 1.

Home Sweet Home in a Volga

By Alastair Gee
 Staff Writer

Igor Bochagov wakes up in the back seat of his yellow Volga some mornings around seven, seven-thirty. He brushes his teeth with the water under his hood that's meant for the windshield wipers. He stops for breakfast at a nearby kiosk.

The day begins.

Bochagov shuttles from two to 10 passengers across Moscow. At nights, he stops at the Aviamotornaya garage, where he has coffee with other cabbies. Once or twice a month, he visits one of the hotels on Leningradsky Prospekt to have sex with a prostitute.

Bochagov is one of hundreds of cabbies without a permanent address, untethered to any apartment or neighborhood. As the rest of the city gets up, goes to work, has lunch, works, goes home, has dinner, goes to bed, the taxi drivers float through the city, sleeping for three- or four-hour intervals on the side of the road, near metro hubs, near train stations. Dynamo Stadium is a particularly big nighttime draw.

"There's no stability in this job," explained Alexander, 28, who declined to give his last name. Like Bochagov, Alexander works for New Yellow Taxis, the city's largest cab company. "A lot of these gypsy cabs," he said, referring to the thousands of unregistered cabs flooding city streets, "they're changing the prices. They drive someone for kopeks."

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Alastair Gee / MT

Igor Bochagov getting some late-night fresh air in between shuttling passengers and going to sleep in his back seat.

With less demand for professional cabs, drivers are making less money, said Alexander, as a small team of Central Asians in heavy overalls hosed down his car at Aviamotornaya. And it's not just the money. The cars aren't serviced as well, and drivers have to work longer hours, he said. "People are becoming drivers for oligarchs," Alexander said.

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The garage at Aviamotornaya, one of four rented by New Yellow Taxi, is the base for hundreds of cabs. It's quiet come midnight except for the car wash. The drivers watch their cars washed with screaming water jets as they sip strong, sweet coffee. Next door, in a damp room with peeling, flowery wallpaper, are six slot machines. A girl named Nadya sits there until dawn, doling out winnings, coffee and tea.

New Yellow Taxi spokesman Eduard Mikhitarian said the company had 1,500 cars, but he added that, at any given time, only 800 of those are in use.

In any event, as professional cab drivers have been forced to work harder for less money, they've resorted to cost-saving measures like sleeping in their cars.

They do this, they say, because they rent their cars for two-day stints -- Volgas go for 1,150 rubles daily, while a Ford Focus runs 1,500 rubles -- and they don't want to waste time. "You don't want to waste time," said another New Yellow driver, Igor, who was afraid of the repercussions of giving his full name. "We live to earn money."

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want to waste hours driving to apartments in the Moscow or Tver regions. Better to camp out under the city lights. "You don't want to waste time," said another New Yellow driver, Igor, who was afraid of the repercussions of giving his full name. "We live to earn money."

Nowhere is safer than anywhere else. "When I get tired, I just pull over," Igor said. Igor and other drivers spend nights near Sokol and Aeroport metro stations, Yaroslavsky and Belorussky stations, up and down Leningradsky Prospekt.

Igor doesn't like being confined to his cab all day. He says he avoids McDonald's, preferring street kiosks or the dining hall at Elektrozavodskaya, another one of New Yellow Taxi's three outposts.

Some cab drivers are literally prisoners in their cars.

One Central Asian driver, who would only give the name Muslim, said he sleeps in his New Yellow Taxi seven nights a week.

His son has an apartment, the driver said, but he only goes there to wash his clothes and take showers. He lives on bananas, chocolate and juice. He keeps his cab scrupulously clean.

"I live in my car -- I'm a guest worker," the 59-year-old said. "I'm registered in the Sverdlovsk region, but I don't live there. I live here without registration. I don't get out of the car. They check for registration on the streets."

New Yellow Taxis, for its part, says none of its drivers sleeps in cars. The only exception to that comes when drivers travel to another town, far outside Moscow, and they have to return to the capital late at night, said Eduard Aznauryan, the company's deputy director.

Besides New Yellow Taxis, there are nine other registered cab companies in Moscow, bringing the total number of registered cabs to between 5,000 and 6,000. Another 30,000 unregistered, or gypsy, cabs also operate, said Maria Protsenko, spokeswoman for Moscow's transportation department.

The new registered companies have taken over the old garages once used by the Soviet taxi system. That system, which included an array of different-hued cars, collapsed in 1993, two years after the Soviet Union did. New Yellow Taxi was founded in 2001.

At Dynamo, meanwhile, there's a whole nighttime routine that revolves around the flock of post-Soviet cabbies shuttling New Russians, clubbers, foreigners and others down the Garden Ring, Novy Arbat, the many side streets and back streets of the city's remote corners.

The kiosk at Dynamo doesn't offer much. On a recent night, two lone tables stood in the open air. There were no seats. The murmur of cabbies and vendors and nearby construction workers permeated the night air.

Rushania, the Tartar saleswoman at the Dynamo kiosk, estimated there were between 20 and 30 drivers who pull up every night. "They're a good crowd. Mostly, they're respectful, they say hello, they're chatty. They also rest here."

Bochagov takes a philosophical view of a life lived in a New Yellow Taxi.

Once, not so long ago, he used to sell used Army weapons to private buyers in Poland and Turkey. He said he made a lot of cash but lost it all in the

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1998 crash.

Now, Bochagov said, he earns about \$2,000 per month, well above the national average. That includes his taxi fares and the money he makes transporting cars to Germany and elsewhere.

He relieves himself in portable sidewalk toilets or the hidden corner of a courtyard. He keeps an icon and a dollar bill on his dashboard. When he drives, he often thinks of his 1-year-old son, Maxim, who lives in the Moscow region town of Vladimir with his ex-wife. "I think it's better when you live with them the whole time," Bochagov said, "in your home, with a favorite girl."

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