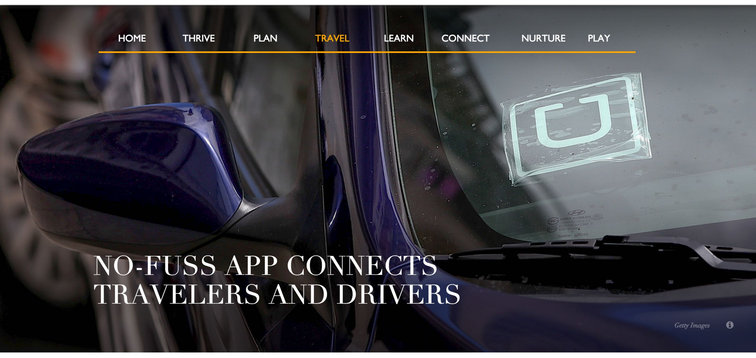

NO-FUSS APP CONNECTS TRAVELERS AND DRIVERS

Getty Images

Matt Alderton, NowU
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Do You Uber? It's a High-Tech Way to Find a Ride

It was a late night in the mountainous metropolis of Bogotá, Colombia. While touring South America on vacation, world traveler Anita Mahaffey and her husband were dining at a restaurant in a "sketchy" neighborhood when they decided to call a taxi to take them back to their hotel.

They waited. And waited some more. But the taxi never showed. That's when Mahaffey, 56, pulled out her smartphone.

"I pulled up the Uber app and was like, 'Oh gosh! They have Uber here!' So, we called an Uber and they were there in three minutes," said Mahaffey, founder and CEO of Cool-jams Inc., a San Diego-based maker of temperature-control sleepwear and bedding.

"They were great. The driver had a clean car. He spoke English. It was probably the best taxi ride we had the whole time we were in South America," she said.

Using Technology to Connect Passengers and Drivers

For the uninitiated, Uber is an on-demand car service that positions itself as a convenient alternative to traditional taxis. Bookable through a GPS-enabled smartphone app, the service connects travelers with a pool of independent drivers working in the immediate area who use their own cars and work on either a full- or part-time basis.

> You can put in your location, but I've found that it helps to text them, 'I'm standing under a blue awning and I have a purple hat on.'
>
> *Shawn Underwood, Uber user*

No money need change hands — the cost of the trip is automatically deducted from an online account — and drivers and passengers have the opportunity to rate each other for the benefit of future travelers and drivers.

Uber, which requires all cars to meet minimum standards for age, safety and condition, pays for on-duty insurance, screens drivers using a three-step criminal background check and supplies the technology.

The service is available in some 150 North American cities and over 50 countries.

Shawn Underwood uses Uber regularly when she visits her daughter in Los Angeles. She prefers it to taxis, she said, because the rates typically are cheaper, the service generally faster and the drivers often nicer.

"It's a thousand times cheaper than a taxi, and it's way easier," said Underwood, 58, owner of two vintage goods stores in Seattle.

Mahaffey agreed. "It seems like every time I use it, I become a bigger fan," she said, adding that it's especially useful for travelers, because it doesn't require users to carry cash or wait outside in unfamiliar neighborhoods. "It's just so efficient."

How Uber Works

Courtesy of Uber

1. New users visit Uber.com to create a free account that includes name, mobile phone number, email address, language and credit card, which will be automatically charged when the service is used.
2. The account can then be accessed through a free Uber app, which is available for Apple, Android, Windows and BlackBerry devices.
3. Uber offers up to seven vehicle types, but not all types are available in all cities.

Using the slider at the bottom of the screen, users can choose from uberBLACK (a black car); uberTAXI (a traditional taxicab); uberX, uberXL or uberPLUS (everyday cars driven by citizen drivers); UberSUV (a sport utility vehicle); or UberLUX (a high-end luxury car). UberLUX, UberSUV and uberBLACK are the most expensive options; uberX its least expensive.

4. To find a car, a user finds his or her location on the map (represented by a green pin) and taps "Set Pickup Location." The app then estimates how long the wait will be, and provides a fare estimator.
5. The app will hail a nearby driver. When it does, it provides the driver's name, photo, phone number, license plate number, vehicle make and model, and location, which the map tracks.

If necessary, the user can contact the driver by phone or text. Note: Cancellations within five minutes are free; after that, there's a $10 cancellation fee.

6. Uber automatically bills the credit card on file for the trip.
7. Following the ride, both the passenger and driver can rate one another; passengers with low ratings might have a hard time hailing their next ride and drivers with low ratings are automatically suspended.

What Travelers Should Keep in Mind

Uber isn't without its issues, which range from drivers who don't know the area as well as many taxi drivers to exorbitant "surge" pricing.

Here are some tips to make your ride a good one:

Try it locally first. If you're new to Uber, take a trial run at home. "Try it locally so you understand how it feels and how it works," advised Jeremy Loeckler, founder of TourMatters.com, a website that helps travelers research tours and tour operators. "Also, make sure you download the app and configure your payment method before you go so you're not fumbling with that on the sidewalk in your destination."

Plan in advance. Uber is currently available in approximately 150 North American cities and 55 countries. Check your destination before your trip to make sure it's an option.

Check your data. International travelers, in particular, should be mindful of their data plan and any additional fees or charges.

Know where you're going. Uber drivers don't always know the city as well as taxi drivers, so they're heavily reliant on GPS. "Use Google to get an accurate address for your drop-off destination before you get in," Loeckler suggested.

Help your driver find you. Underwood recommended calling or texting before pickup to tell the driver exactly where you are. "You can put in your location, but I've found that it helps to text them, 'I'm standing under a blue awning and I have a purple hat on,'" she said. "Otherwise they can get lost looking for you."

Don't count on Uber at airports. Many cities have restrictions on the types of vehicles can pick up passengers at airports. "You might have to resort to using cabs," Loeckler said.

Don't forget to tip. If you use uberTAXI, a tip is automatically added. If you use any other Uber service, it's not.

"A lot of passengers come in with a misconception that tip is included in their Uber ride; that's actually not the case," said Los Angeles-based Uber driver Harry Campbell, who publishes a blog and podcast for his fellow drivers at TheRidesharegGuy.com. "Unfortunately, there is no option to tip in the app, but drivers obviously appreciate cash tips for going above and beyond with good service."

Be patient. During busy periods, you might have trouble getting a car. And if you do get one, it might cost extra, because Uber often charges "surge" pricing — one, two, even 10 times the normal rate — when passenger demand is high.

"I talked to one driver, and he told me when that happens, all you have to do is wait a couple of minutes and try again," Underwood said. "By then, the surge will probably have gone down."

Try alternatives. In the event of a surge, Campbell suggested trying an Uber competitor such as Lyft or Sidecar. "Uber doesn't have a limit on surge pricing; Lyft does," he said. "Over 50 percent of drivers drive for multiple services, so it's very likely you'll get the same driver you would have had, just a different company and a [potentially] lower rate."

One final tip: Uber drivers can make excellent concierges.

"Obviously, drivers live in that city themselves," Campbell said. "They're everyday people, so while they might not know the city streets as well as a cab driver, they'll have great recommendations for their favorite spots."

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