

When Life Gives You a Lemon

BY MELINDA MURPHY

Driving in Singapore is a luxury. Well, not always.



I have a crappy car. A really crappy car. I shouldn't complain, right? After all, I have a car in Singapore where what you fork out to buy a vehicle can buy you a yacht in other countries.

But here's the deal: it's a really crappy car.

I first saw the notice on the message board at The American Club. "White Peugeot 206. Eight years old. \$22,000. \$11.5k PARE." Wow. We could actually afford that *and* get back half our money in two years. Unlike many expats, a car is not part of our package.

Back home, I would have scoffed at this car. I test drove everything in the States before choosing my Lexus SUV. Here? I didn't care. A car was a car. It didn't matter if it was comfortable or cute or anything. It had four wheels and air con.

My husband wasn't interested, not even a little. So I stepped up my pitch. I felt like I did in 5th grade when I campaigned to get my ears pierced. I dropped hints, many not-so-subtle. I begged. I cajoled. I explained I wanted a car to run the kids from sports to the mall without stopping home first to drop off equipment. Or to lug stuff to Girl Scout meetings. Or to

Christmas shop without having to run home with bags between stores. Then, I begged some more. I even got my kids to ask. Dirty trick, I know.

Finally, he gave in and, a few days later, there it was: a little white Peugeot in the condo parking lot – and it was all ours.

But the love affair didn't last very long, as only a month or so after we bought it, the air-con started to go. We got the air-con gas topped up only to have it happen again very quickly. We topped it up again. And again. And again. Turns out, we needed an entire new system, which would mean importing parts from France and removing the entire interior panel. Can you say expensive? With a price tag almost a quarter of what we paid for the car, we decided to make the best of it, which means driving with the windows down.

Yup. No air-con in Singapore.

This is but one of our woes. Because it was so stinking hot, I had to keep the windows open. Using quite normal force, I pushed the controls for the driver's side window and the entire set of controls fell into the door panel. After lots of expletives

and searching for handy tools for fishing in door panels, the entire control now hangs out of the door, daring me to do something about it. Turns out, repairing the window controls also isn't cheap.

Other things started to fall apart, too. I squeezed the gearshift to back out of a parking spot and it literally crumbled into a dozen pieces in my hand. Ditto with the electric key. (By the way, if your electric key breaks, you can't start your car. Seriously.)

Driving around in the Singapore heat without air-con is tough – and dangerous. My motto is, if it's raining and we get a little wet, well then great. At least we're cooler! It's just part of the life-with-the-windows-down life.

Once, however, during a massive downpour, I had to put the windows up because my daughter and I were getting drenched. Guess what? The windows fogged. I mean, I couldn't make out a single thing and there I was driving on the PIE in a bad storm. I made my eight-year-old daughter take off her shirt so I could wipe the windows with it. "Well, at least I'm cooler, Mommy." Love that kid. By the way, I am now the proud owner of a little green window-wiping towel. I also have a fan that plugs into the lighter. It's a sexy piece of cooling equipment, let me tell you, and pretty much useless.

Then there are the smells. Durian season with the windows down takes on a whole new meaning. My nose also knows there's a water treatment plant in Sungei Ulu Pandan. The other day I got stuck behind a trash truck in sweltering heat for several kilometres. Wow. That was ... something.

My kids and I have to scream at each other to be heard

over the noise and wind. Sitting next to a bus is always fun. Turns out, my window is exactly the same height as a bus exhaust. Nice.

I love how my friends all look stunned when I tell them I'm happy to give them a lift, but warn I have no AC. Most say "no problem", but you can tell they get in the car and then wonder what they're doing there. I actually get a lot of looks from strangers, too. I'm dying to know what they're thinking. Probably something like, "What is that crazy woman doing driving around with her windows down? Doesn't she know it's super hot?"

Surprisingly, there are lots of lovely things, too, about life with the windows down. A truck of jasmine plants pulled up next to me the other day. I've discovered all sorts of music I wouldn't normally choose. I also have an excuse for not looking too good when I get to work. I told my boss I leave the house polished and put together, but I'm not sure she believes me. She's only ever seen me windblown and tattered.

Maybe the best part of having your windows down is simply meeting people. Motorcyclists can be quite chatty. Yesterday, a navy convertible Rolls Royce with bright orange seats pulled up next to us. I said to my kids, "Now *that's* a nice car." The guy heard me and we had a lovely chat while sitting at the light. I wish I'd had some Grey Poupon to offer him.

So, while I never would have chosen this lemon of ours, it turns out there's a bit of lemonade waiting just outside my window. The message? Throw open those windows of yours. Live life on the edge. Experience Singapore like you never have. Then tell me where I can get a good deal on another car. And please, not a French one. *a*

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