

New taxi app books a ride for Ivory Coast middle class

ABIDJAN, CÔTE D'IVOIRE: In bustling Abidjan, a homegrown company has tapped into the global taxi app revolution that has spawned Uber and other online transport networks. While Uber has already jumped into several African markets from South Africa to Egypt, Africab seeks to provide Ivory Coast's emerging middle class with a locally-owned high-tech and reliable travel option.



Image Source: [LinkedIn](#)

Africab's clients can use the company app to book its taxis - which cannot be hailed in the road, and it advertises its services only online. Its fixed fares tend to be higher than for regular taxis, but clients benefit from extra perks.

A daytime trip that would cost around 2,000 CFA francs (\$3.2, three euros) in an old cab can cost 3,300 CFA francs in an Africab. But the start-up's sleek vehicles - which are owned by the company, not by the driver - are all air-conditioned. They are fitted with tablet devices and offer free Wi-Fi internet access.

"Brr, it's cold inside!" jests Ivorian comedian Michel Gohou in an advertising video for Africab's fleet.

"Africab is the new way of getting around," brags Vangsy Goma, the founder and managing director of the firm.

Navigating Abidjan's unruly traffic

The company, Goma says on Africab's website, seeks "to build an entrepreneurial culture that is based on technology and respects African identity." The idea for Africab came from trying to navigate Abidjan's unruly traffic, says Goma, a native of the Republic of Congo educated in the US and Europe and married to an Ivorian woman.

"When I came here, I often had difficulty organising journeys. You had to get out on the street, haggle... or sometimes rent a car and brave the traffic," he said.

"The cars (regular taxis) were dilapidated, they are often more than 20 years old. Drivers are badly trained and for the most part, there is no air-conditioning."

Until political strife erupted in 2010-11, Ivory Coast had long been the star economic performer in west Africa. But when former president Laurent Gbagbo refused to step down despite an election defeat, 3,000 people were killed in months of conflict. With a 10-percent yearly economic growth rate, the west African country is now back on the rails.

The International Monetary Fund said last month that it was on track towards becoming the continent's fastest-growing economy. Companies like Africab are tapping into the budding optimism that the upward trend has brought.

Its launch in February 2016 cost one billion CFA francs (1.5 million euros, \$1.6 million) in investment, of which 800 million was raised by bank loans. Goma is confident about expanding the firm, with a monthly turnover that rose from 20 million CFA francs in April to 60 million by September and a fast-growing portfolio of business clients.

Adapting its services to local needs

In coming weeks, he says, Africab taxis will take to the streets of Lome and Cotonou, the capital of Togo and the economic capital of Benin. To make it work, the company is striving to adapt its services to local needs. As is often the case in African towns and cities, many of Abidjan's backstreets and alleys have never been named. To get round this, Africab maps the addresses of clients and familiar landmarks.

And in a striking contrast with ordinary taxis, Africab drivers are bound to abide by the highway code. Driving on pavements or in emergency lanes to avoid traffic jams is strictly banned, and all company cabbies have to retake both driving and highway code tests.

Satisfied client Fatou Bamba, who manages her own company, finds Africab's cars clean and comfortable - plus there's the internet bonus. "Above all, you're safe... You can work inside an Africab and you don't feel the stress of driving and the traffic jams," Bamba said.

Taxi driver Ahi Mian, 32, appears happy to have joined Africab's fleet. "It's better for me. I drove a regular taxi before. Here we have fixed hours and the car is air-conditioned. But above all, there's less stress," he says.

Source: AFP