



Robbi Pengelly/Index-Trib

SONOMA SEGWAY OWNER Hunt Bailie stops for a break outside the Sebastiani Winery while leading a group around town.

Segway, meet Sonoma

The two-wheeled self-balancing scooter slides into town

By Emily Setzer
INDEX-TRIBUNE INTERN

Imagine zipping past downtown traffic while standing in place. This isn't the scene from "Back to the Future" where Marty rides his flying skateboard around. This is what it's like riding a Segway Human Transporter — a self-balancing variation of the scooter that moves when you lean forward and backward.

Disney World staff, postal workers in Florida and police officers in Boston ride them. Vice President Dick Cheney scoots around on one in his Washington office when his Achilles tendon acts up. And President George W. Bush infamously fell off one while vacationing in Maine.

The funny-looking scooters debuted locally at the Independence Day parade with people weaving around the Plaza handing out coupons for Sonoma Segway tours, the brand-new company that introduced the Segway to Sonoma.

Only weeks before the parade, Sonoma Segway owners Hunt and Yuni Bailie had never even ridden a Segway. They had seen the scooters around, thought how great they would be for Sonoma, and had already begun to create a business plan before even setting foot on one.

They were hooked after taking a trip to Oakland to test out the Segways, quickly began researching and planning, and now rent out the machines and offer individualized tours through Sonoma. Plans are in the works for buying eight to 12 Segways and opening an office on the Plaza in the near future.

"I've done some neat things like flying and am an avid bicyclist but this was totally different. ... It's something fun to do with other friends and a good way to get around and see the town."

— Marcia Trinkley, tourist

see the town," said Vermont resident Marcia Trinkley, who took a tour while visiting Sonoma.

"People generally seem comfortable on them after about 30 minutes, but it initially feels weird to give up control," said Hunt.

Whereas learning to ride a bike requires mastering side-to-side balance, riding a Segway requires forward-backward balance. After turning on the machine and stepping aboard, one can move ahead or in reverse by leaning and applying pressure with either the toes or the heels. The machine relies on gyroscopes to automatically balance the rider. To stop, just straighten up. Rotating the left handle's steering grip — similar to a bike or motorcycle's gear shifter — will turn the Segway either left or right.

Segways detect the rider's center of gravity via a combination of solid-state gyroscopes, tilt sensors, high-speed microprocessors and electric motors. They silently run off batteries that can be recharged by plugging them into a wall outlet and can handle steep hills and rough terrain. The batteries usually last about 20 miles before requiring charging.

Groups must first watch a 30-minute instructional video and go over all the rules

sign a waiver promising that they will not take any illegal drugs or alcohol while renting the Segways.

Participants also must promise not to ride the Segways on the sidewalk within an approximately one-block radius of the Plaza for the consideration of other pedestrians. The no-sidewalk boundaries are outlined on a map of town that is provided by the company.

Segways come with three keys of different colors that limit the Segway's speed to either 6 mph, 8 mph, or 12.5 mph. Since the maximum speed limit on sidewalks is 8.5 mph, riders can proactively limit themselves by using that particular key.

Dean Kamen, of Deka Research & Development Corporation based out of New Hampshire, invented the snazzy scooters and is also known for creating a wheelchair that climbs stairs. Kamen eventually wants to see U.S. special forces troops ride the machines into battle, although they are currently gaining more peaceful popularity as an alternative means of transportation.

Sonoma Segway encourages people of all ages to try it out, but asks that riders be at least 12 years old and weigh between 100 and