

## **Tourists are on a roll.**

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'Be prepared to become a tourist attraction in and of yourself," warns David Mebane, owner of City Segway Tours, as I step onto the gyroscope-guided future of urban sightseeing. Too late. Other visitors are snapping photos of us, and much of the lunchtime crowd near the National Archives building in downtown Washington, D.C., stares at the small tour group teetering on Segways.

Two years after the space-age two-wheeler was introduced, Segway HTs (for human transporter) are as rare a sight as solar-powered cars. That's changing in cities from Paris to Vancouver, Canada, where the \$3,000-plus vehicles have found one enthusiastic cohort: tourists. An HT rental can help travelers get closer to the sights than a bus would, while sparing the fatigue of a walking tour. The novelty of riding the hipster vehicle is an added bonus--and burden.

Last year, Mebane added several Segways to his bike tour business in Paris. The Segway rentals took off, so he branched out, starting tours in Nice on the Riviera, New Orleans, Chicago, and Washington, where four-hour tours of the National Mall run twice a day at \$65 a person.

Mebane, an enterprising 29-year-old from Austin, equips us with earpieces so we can hear about the sites. But this group cares more about the wheels than about the White House. When Marcia Keely, 68, from Monterey, Calif., saw the Segway tour, she promptly told her husband, Lee, "I'm not leaving D.C. till we do that." Two women from Australia joke that they came to the United States just to ride a Segway after bad weather thwarted their efforts to take an HT tour in Paris.

Mebane promises, "You'll be pros in two minutes." The HT wobbles as I steady myself. Leaning forward or backward sets the Segway in motion. Turns are made with an up or down twist of the left handlebar. At the two-minute mark, everyone is moving, but we hardly look like pros. It took me a couple of hours to master the vehicle.

Code red. We wear bright bicycle helmets. No Segway-related fatalities have been reported, but Mebane says there have been some spills. Another precaution: A color-coded ignition key locks our speed at less than the 12.5-mph, red-key max. We roll down the pedestrian-clogged Pennsylvania Avenue using the black key that sets a 6-mph maximum.

I'm thankful we have a guide. Negotiating curb cuts and crossing busy streets require skill and nerve. Gawking pedestrians, choppy sidewalk, and--in security-conscious Washington--concrete barriers are everywhere. We were allowed to ride in high-security areas, such as outside the White House. An added bonus: You can see over other tourists.

We stretch at every stop; the Segway saves your feet--but your legs could get tired from standing. And for all its agility, the Segway is a bit obtrusive. Pedestrians get pushed aside by its wide berth and shaken by its knack for sneaking up, which might make testy locals even less friendly toward tourists. In fact, HTs are banned on sidewalks in some places--including San Francisco and New York City.

Near the end of the tour, an excited tourist leaps in my path to snap a picture, reminding me that I'd rather be the tourist than the attraction.