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Sarasota by Segway

In Fla., Trading a Tour Bus for a Two-Wheeler

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Eight inches off the ground, and with a helmet perched atop my head, I am taller than any of the people who stop to gawk at me gliding by the chic shops of Sarasota, Fla. With a twitch of my body, I speed up to about 8 mph when I reach the broad promenade along the shores of Sarasota Bay.

I bend my head forward and my feet follow, yet without moving. I am powered, yet exert no power. I do not feel that I am on a machine. I feel a part of the machine; the machine feels part of me.

I am at one with my Segway Human Transporter. Shortly after a 15-minute lesson in the parking lot of Florida Ever-Glides, I am ready to take on the city of Sarasota, and feel like I could take on the world.

The Segway, created by "inventpreneur" Dean Kamen, has fallen far short of its ballyhooed promise to transform human transport. The two-wheeled, electric-powered scooter filled with gyroscopes and computer chips poses no threat to the car or family minivan. But if I sold tours by trolley, bus or foot, I'd be shaking in my boots. Quite simply, the Segway is an awesome means of locomotion for tourists seeking a quick grasp of an area new to them.

It offers the kind of intimacy you get from walking, and the comfort and ease of a bus or trolley tour. As an added bonus, the Segway gives you a sense of power. It mentally transports you to a science-fiction world in which humans with robotic parts become bionic men and women.

A husband-wife team from Idaho began offering Segway tours of Sarasota last month. Their choice of location was a studied one: Sarasota has great weather year-round and offers both a wide blue bay and interesting streets lined with galleries and shops selling enticing goods you won't find in a mall. Its roads and bayside promenade are flat. It's also an upscale destination, with an ambiance that's more affluent California than retirement Florida, so tourists won't likely flinch at the \$58 price tag for a 2 1/2-hour tour. Given that each machine costs about \$5,000, the price didn't seem unreasonable, although it was just enough to keep us from begging for a second round once the first tour was over.

Tom and Janey Jacobson say they were the first in the United States to offer guided Segway tours. But the idea is hot. Segway tours of Paris are already getting glowing reviews and are being extended to Nice. You can rent a Segway to glide around London. In Hawaii, an entrepreneur recently began giving historic guided tours of Waikiki.

You also can take a backroads tour of Bangkok by Segway. You can rent Segways by the hour, day or week in Montreal, Vancouver, Seattle, Spokane, Salt Lake City, Las Vegas and New Orleans. This spring and summer they'll be available in Minneapolis/St. Paul; Grand Lake, Colo., at the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park; and in six Alaskan cities and towns.

A friend and I begin our three-day tour of Sarasota by car and foot -- which we'll only later discover is a far inferior way. On the other hand, you need a car to explore the white-sand keys attached to downtown Sarasota by bridge.

As we drive through Lido Key north to our cottage on Longboat Key, just minutes from downtown, we agree that it would be hard to make a mistake in choosing lodgings here. There are no rundown properties apparent. The area reeks of money, but most of it falls short of being ostentatious. In fact, our cottage turns out to be one of a half-dozen 1950s-style cottages along a sandy dirt road just off the two-lane highway that runs through Longboat Key. Each cottage is brightly painted a combination of blue, pink and yellow. An empty white-sand beach stretches along the Gulf of Mexico as far as the eye can see. Shells crunch under our feet, and within minutes, we've found two perfect sand dollars.

We find lunch in an equally low-key, Old Florida-style restaurant. From a rustic wooden patio overlooking the water, we watch pelicans dive for fish. I envy the people who arrive at the restaurant by boat and tie up at the pier in front of Mar Vista Dockside Restaurant. I decide I'll try to buy some Docksider shoes and rent a boat the next day, so I too can arrive at lunch with panache.

But alas, not every Florida day is filled with sunshine. But it's just as well that our second day in Sarasota is rainy. Otherwise, I might have missed the amazing collection of Ringling brother John and his wife, Mable.

Many people assume that a museum created by a Ringling brother would be filled with stuffed fat ladies and old clown suits. Indeed, there is a small circus museum on the 66-acre estate that John Ringling willed to the state of Florida. But he and his wife spent much of their life collecting fine art and antiques from Europe and beyond. Their mansion, built in the 1920s, could not begin to hold their acquisitions. So the childless couple created on their land a pink stone museum that frankly makes museums like the Phillips and the Frick seem downright modest.

Ringling at one time owned most of Sarasota. He chose prime property along the bay for his mansion, gardens and two museums. The mansion, called Ca d'Zan ("House of John" in Venetian dialect), is worthy of a tour even by people who don't usually cotton to house tours, because the Ringlings had not only money but taste and a sense of humor as well. Their home, moreover, encompasses the history of many grand buildings.

The Ringlings were building their manse at a time when many other rich families were tearing theirs down. Furniture and even entire walls were rescued from mansions once owned by the Biltmores, Vanderbilts and wealthy European families who could no longer afford the upkeep of palatial family homes. John Ringling also commissioned for the ballroom a ceiling with 22 hand-painted panels, each depicting a type of dance from around the world. (Later this month, the Sarasota Ballet, in concert with Circus Sarasota, will present a show inspired by the ceiling. It will mix ballet with dances in the style of Ziegfeld Follies girls and Egyptian belly dancers, to name a few.)

The rooms of Ca d'Zan include gold-leaf columns from Venice, throne chairs from England, tapestries from the Astor estate, an Aeolian organ with 2,289 pipes, a massive dining table with 22 leaves, silk and velvet chairs from the Italian Renaissance and a Bohemian crystal chandelier rescued from the original Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, which was torn down to make way for the Empire State Building.

And that's just the house. The museum is filled with treasures, including a vast collection of Cypriot antiquities, Chinese ceramics, works by Velazquez, Guercino and major artists of the Renaissance and baroque periods. Special exhibits are also hosted; we happen to catch the photography of Margaret Bourke-White.

Mable Ringling filled gardens with statues, thousands of roses and exotic trees from around the world. The banyan trees were purportedly given to her by Thomas Edison, just one of the many luminaries of that day who visited John and Mable.

Our visit takes about four hours, and that's rushing it. But shops in both downtown Lido Key and Sarasota had caught our attention during a drive-through, and they beckon. If you come to Sarasota either bring a lot of cash or decide to window-shop with abandon. The stores tend toward the high end, offering paintings, sculptures, glass, furniture and clothing made by fine artists and craftspeople both locally and from around the world.

Given its size, Sarasota, with a year-round population of about 50,000, is amazingly cosmopolitan, with its own ballet company and an acclaimed opera house. We scope out the live theater offerings that week at several major venues and settle on a movie in the Burns Court Cinema, an old, tiny, family-owned theater that offers art-house and foreign films.

Much as we enjoy this city -- its beaches, relaxing pace and urbanity -- the highlight of our trip awaits: Sarasota by Segway.

The rain of the previous day has caused the other members of our tour to cancel this morning, so instead of the maximum of six Segway riders, my friend and I share the complete attention of the Jacobsons. The 85-pound Segways we are each assigned basically propel themselves to the parking lot; we simply guide them with a single hand. Guide Tom Jacobson sets up cones for us to practice gliding around. It takes just a few minutes to get the feel of standing, feet flat, on what is basically a laptop computer monitoring every move we make. I don't begin to understand how it works, but Tom and Janey talk about gyroscopes and computer chips that keep the Segway balanced.

To move forward you simply lean forward toward the handlebar. There are no brakes: The Segway stops instantly if you straighten your stance. Lean back slightly and it goes backward. Turn the left handle on the handlebar and the Segway turns. The machine is only a few inches wider than your body and turns as quickly and smoothly as an unaided human body. In fact, it soon seems like part of you. I feel no more obtrusive on the sidewalk, and don't feel any more of a danger to others, than I would walking down the street -- assuming I curb my enthusiasm for speed. The further you lean forward, the faster you go.

On wide-open spaces, the Segway can travel up to 12 mph. However, that's a pace for experienced drivers on a straight-away, and it requires you to insert a key in a special "black" or expert ignition.

Tom and Janey start us out on an ignition switch that limits us to 6 mph. We go much slower as we "stroll" the city streets and then wind through the narrow sidewalks of an artists' colony, where more than 40 craftspeople have taken up residence in a series of brightly painted bungalows. It's an extremely cool community just blocks from the heart of downtown that we would have missed were it not for our Segway tour. Unfortunately, we discover it too late to return to shop while the artists are at work.

The tour takes us through an area of homes built in the 1920s and past the Sarasota Opera House. The building, erected in 1926, was once a theater that offered a stage to Will Rogers, the Ziegfeld Follies and Elvis Presley.

Traveling down residential streets and sidewalks, we reach the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, home of 20,000 plants. We're not allowed to glide inside -- permission may be sought at a later date -- but even from outside we can catch glimpses of some of the 6,000 orchids for which the gardens are famed.

The Jacobsons guide us, with running commentary on what we're seeing, to a bayside snack shop for a coffee break on picnic tables overlooking piers lined with recreational boats. By now we're practically experts, and they allow us to key into an ignition that allows max speeds of 8 mph.

Before I felt cool; now I feel like the proverbial Hell on Wheels. My traveling companion happens to be a public school principal, small of stature when on foot. But she'd be a fearsome and formidable force, racing down the hall on a Segway to collar a troublemaker. If authorities really want to gain control of unruly schools, all they need to do is hand out a Segway to every principal.

I want one too, even though I know it's not fast enough for my 10-mile commute to work or safe enough for the three-mile ride to the nearest shopping in my neighborhood. And where would I put the groceries if I did brave the traffic? To say nothing of my family.

But the Segway as a tourist toy should prevail long after the novelty has worn off. I've never had a better tour of a city than I had of Sarasota on my Segway. And the entire time I was imagining how great it would be to glide along a lightly traveled road in a national park, or on a paved bike path through field and forest. I want to be bionic in nature, too.

Cindy Loose will be online to discuss this story Monday at 2 p.m. during the Travel section's regular weekly chat at www.washingtonpost.com.

Details: Sarasota, Fla.

GETTING THERE: Connecting service to Sarasota is available from all three D.C. area airports. Sale fares sometimes go for as low as \$200 round trip but range steeply upward from there. Nonstops are available to Tampa, an hour's drive away, on US Airways, AirTran, Southwest and United. Fares begin at about \$160 round trip.

WHERE TO STAY: Although downtown Sarasota is great for strolling and shopping, beach lovers will want to head to one of the nearby keys. You'll think you've time-traveled back to the 1950s at Rolling Waves Cottages on Longboat Key (6351 Gulf of Mexico Dr., 941-383-1323, www.rollingwaves.com).

The brightly painted cottages, steps from the beach, are simple but clean and nicely furnished. Prices begin at \$120 a night for a one-bedroom.

If being on the beach isn't a top priority, try the Cypress B&B (621 Gulfstream Ave. S., 941-955-4683, www.cypressbb.com); rooms from \$150 a night, depending on season.

WHERE TO EAT: Mar Vista Dockside (760 Broadway) on Longboat Key is a charming Old Florida restaurant on the water, specializing in seafood and sandwiches. Entrees begin at about \$10. Mattison's City Grille (1 N. Lemon) offers a continental menu, including gourmet sandwiches; entrees begin at about \$10. Uva Rara (440 S. Pineapple Ave.) serves northern Italian cuisine, with entrees from \$11.

ATTRACTIONS: Allow at least several hours for a tour of the estate of John and Mable Ringling, including Ca D'Zan Mansion, the Ringling Museum of Art (5401 Bay Shore Rd., 941-359-5700, www.ringling.org) and a small circus museum. Admission to all attractions, including a house tour and special exhibits, is \$15.

Marie Selby Botanical Gardens (South Palm Avenue and U.S. 41, 941-366-5731, www.selby.org; \$12) specializes in orchids. The Mote Aquarium (1600 Ken Thompson Pkwy., 941-388-2451, www.mote.org; \$12) includes a pair of manatees in its collection. The Museum of Asian Art (640 S. Washington Blvd., 941-954-8888, www.museumasianart.org; \$5) covers 2,000 years of art and culture from China, Thailand, Nepal, etc.

ACTIVITIES: A 2 1/2-hour Segway tour (200 S. Washington Blvd., Suite 11, 941-363 9556, www.floridaever-glides.com) costs \$58 (\$63 with tax). Kayaks, houseboats, bikes, scooters and all manner of sports equipment are available for rent at local retailers. Bikes typically cost about \$14 a day, \$30 for three days. A 17-foot fishing boat typically goes for about \$100 for a half-day. A number of small businesses offer guided boat tours, fishing expeditions and dolphin tours. Birding and golf also are available. Contact the visitors bureau (see below) for details, as well as an updated listing of what's playing at the opera house and theaters.

INFO: Sarasota Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-522-9799 or 800-800-3906, www.sarasotafl.org.

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2004/01/11/AR2005040308586.html>