

Surfing asphalt on segways in San Francisco

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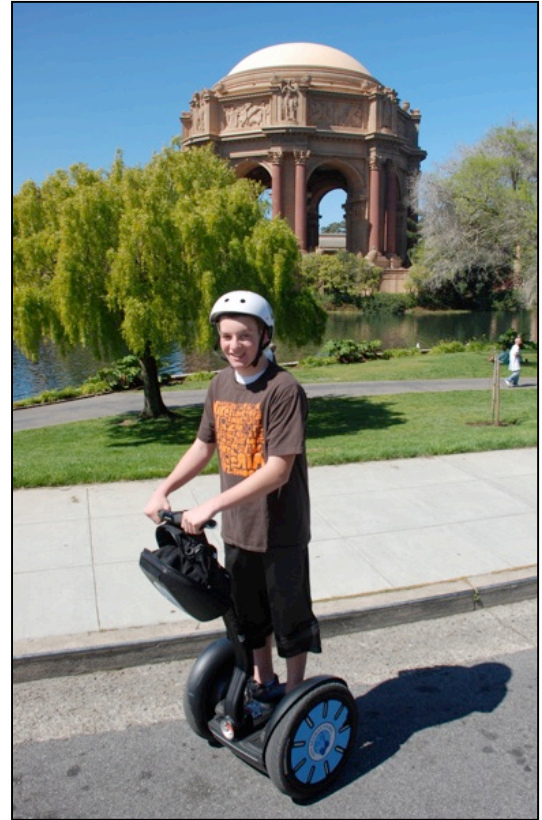
It was hard not to feel conspicuous on a segway, rolling by rubbernecking tourists along San Francisco's Fisherman's Warf.

Balanced on our two-wheeled contraptions, our nerd parade of helmet-topped riders hummed along the city's bicycle lanes, circumventing traffic-choked streets and doddering pedestrians.

City Segway Tours provides the perfect first-timer's sampling of San Francisco's famous sites: Telegraph Hill, the Embarcadero, the TransAmerica Pyramid building, Ghirardelli Square, Palace of Fine Arts, the cable car turnaround, and panoramic views of the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz and the Bay.

It's an easy cruise for people who don't want to hoof it everywhere, but who also don't want to sit in a bus. Plus, it's a heck of a lot of fun for \$70. There are only a couple of limitations to ride – you need to be less than 260 pounds and at least 12 years of age.

Segways are surprisingly easy to operate. One simply steps aboard and subtly shifts their weight from toe to heel, making the machine go softly forward or backwards. A segway's motion isn't jerky and a quick crouch will stop it on a dime. An easy lean of the handle turns the machine as gradually or as sharply as you wish. Or you can remain still and balanced.



“The only thing you have to remember is to leave plenty of space around you,” said Kristian Ruggieri, our effervescent segway tour guide. “The only time people get into trouble is if they bump against curbs or into other riders.”

For the first portion of the tour, the machines are set to go no higher than a barely tolerable 5 mph. Once everyone has the hang of it, the tour guide adjusts the machines to top out at 10 mph.

After donning our helmets and practicing for a bit, we zipped off toward Coit Tower and it occurred to me that we were a tourist spectacle as well – we were surfing the asphalt, whizzing by pointing fingers and smiling faces.

“Riding the segway was such a unique experience,” said Rebecca Shirley, visiting with a group from Hardin,

Montana. “We had a great time and felt a little like celebrities; our picture was taken so many times.”

On a segway, one becomes part of the carnival of characters along Fisherman’s Warf. There are the human statues painted in glittering gold and shimmering silver; the Bushman, who barks “boo” from around a branch he holds in front of his face (and then wants money for scaring you); and an assortment of magicians, performance artists and the incomprehensibly strange. It’s all part of the fun.



But the real star of the day was our guide, Kristian Ruggieri, who also performs for an improvisational troupe, The Improv Society, and independent films. She provided witty insights into the different performers, outdoor art and important buildings that dot the city.

At Aquatic Park, we had plenty of space to practice our moves. One dork fell on his backside trying a backwards spin (guess who). Our journey

continued by the SS Jeremiah O'Brien merchant ship, the Pampanito Submarine (which sank six Japanese ships during World War II) and up some famous city hills. We breezed by the cable car turnaround by Ghirardelli Square, went to the Palace of Fine Arts, and posed at the Marina Green for some great photos of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The segway tour is a great way to see what you want to return to. My son, Jacob, and I took a long walk through Chinatown, the largest outside of Asia, which is a visual feast of markets, colors and clothes. Naturally, we had to ride the cable car, the only moving national landmark in the nation. We clung to a coveted spot on the outside of the car as it clattered up and over Russian and Nob hills.

Fine dining follies

Our evenings were feasting. San Francisco is one of the finest dining cities in the world, so it was incumbent upon us to try something old, something new, something unexpected and something way out of control.

We spent our first night in a traditional haunt: John’s Grill, with a crowd as thick as its steaks. Nobody seemed to mind that we still had our luggage with us, banging our bags against chairs and shins to our table. I was impressed by celebrity photos adorning the high, oak-paneled walls. This 100-year-old establishment also is a setting in Dashel Hammit’s *The Maltese Falcon*. Eager to try its famous steaks, we prepared our palates with exceptional Dungeness crab cocktails and tongue-tingling Caesar salads. While the steaks weren’t overpriced, they didn’t quite live up to the expectations created by our appetizers. My prime bone-in New York was served lukewarm and I thought of asking for steak sauce to pep up the taste, but I had no wish to blaspheme. Everything is à la carte, so a baked potato will set you back another \$3.95.

On the south end of the Embarcadero, the year-old Waterbar is a more recent splash in the fine-dining pool with an expansive selection of fresh oysters and inventive fare. The dining room has four massive, cylindrical fish tanks, one holding a wolf eel so large it could topple a boat. The immaculately dressed, former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown took a seat with his guests next to our table, where we all enjoyed the view of the Bay Bridge and Treasure Island.

My entrée was an Australian kingfish sashimi served on a salt lick with lime, strawberries and avocado. My son became wide eyed when his fish and chips arrived – an entire cod with mouth agape, deboned and stuffed with a tasty dipping sauce. But the unexpected hit of the evening was the sea scallop ceviche with a Peruvian twist.

Next, we switched gears radically and dined at Asia SF, a gender-bending show of jaw-dropping female impersonators strutting through a lip-synched parade of hits. The performers had everyone wondering, “Does she or doesn’t she?” all night. Plus, we had the delightful, sparkling gold-clad Carmina sidle up and guide us through the menu. One might expect little more than appetizers and chicken fingers at similar nightclub establishments, but it served some tasty Asian-inspired dishes. However, be warned: if you’re celebrating a birthday or a bachelorette party, the tradition holds that you have to take a shot of booze from between a performer’s legs. Never have I been so grateful to not be celebrating anything.



The culinary highlight of the trip was Lark Creek Steakhouse, located in the Westfield San Francisco Centre. I know, I know ... in a shopping mall? Trust me, entering the restaurant you’ll feel transported into a cozy upscale eatery. Its menu has exceptional offerings, but here we swung for the fences, choosing Chef Bradley Ogden’s 32-ounce prime porterhouse for two – one of the best I’ve had outside of Buenos Aires. Lark Creek will remind you of why you fell in love with steaks in the first place. With BART mass transit in the basement, and shops and theatres nearby, it’s a great way to polish off a day of strenuous segwaying.

While the City is littered with fine, upscale hotels, the newly renovated Americana offered the best value – spotless, modern and centrally located, it’s a perfect respite for budget-conscious travelers. It has a tasty café offering full breakfasts, lunch and dinner.

For more information:

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or call 877-734-8687 or 415-409-0672.