

SANTA MONICA Mirror

Reflecting the Concerns of the Community

My Day on a Segway (or *Electric Ladyland*)

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Now I know how Charlton Heston felt when he proclaimed that the only way to take away his rifle would be from his cold, dead hands. The object of my obsession is not (shudder) a firearm. It's the Segway.

Dean Kamen, the Segway's inventor, calls it a "self-balancing human transporter" whose gyroscopic sensors and electric motors are controlled by a cluster of microprocessors with three times the power of a typical PC.

None of this matters. All a rider needs to know is that the Segway is intuitive and responds to what your body does. Lean forward and the machine moves forward. Lean further and you go faster. Shift your weight back, the Segway goes backward. Stand up straight and it stops. To turn

left or right, turn the handlebar-mounted steering grip left or right.

The Segway comes with three magnetic keys: the black one limits you to a maximum speed of three miles per hour, the yellow one six, and the red up to 12-1/2 MPH. After a little orientation time, the red key's the only one you'll need.

Prior to my 36-hour test period, I had devised a methodical study that would show how the Segway performed under different conditions. As soon as I felt the rush of wind through my hair, the list went out the window and I spent the evening skimming along the bike path at the beach.

Still, my two-wheeled travels covered a varied terrain: up (and down) Pico Boulevard, along the palisades, crisscrossing side streets, and navigating slower-moving pedestrian thoroughfares. There's no downhill "run-away" effect with the Segway – like

there is with a skateboard – and going uphill requires no more effort than traveling on a flat straightaway.

One unexpected revelation was newfound insight into the frustrations of people whose mobility depends on assistive devices like wheelchairs. Many of the sidewalks in my Ocean Park neighborhood are completely impassable, with utility poles planted in the middle of walkways and driveway curb cuts that dip at a precarious angle. These challenges are not due to flaws in the Segway's design, but are conditions that need to be addressed by urban planners and traffic engineers.

The bike path was by far the most comfortable, freewheeling route, but it required a certain civility in politely turning down requests from strangers to "let me ride it just for a minute."

The Segway also worked well along Main Street, on a day when pedestrian

traffic was light. I even made two fairly grand entrances, one into Joe's Diner, the other into my neighborhood market. For the moment, Segways are new enough and novel enough that no one has made any rules prohibiting them, except for the Third Street Promenade.

The only shortcoming (based on my experience) is the Segway's size and weight. At 83 pounds, the "i" model is more than I care to hoist, and it doesn't fit in the trunk of my car (the smaller "p" model checks in at 70 pounds). But the Segway's pluses far outweigh the solitary minus:

It's fun.

You never have to search for a parking place.

It's inexpensive to operate – just 10 cents' worth of electricity provides a full charge that lasts for 11-17 miles

It's friendly to the environment – no emissions.

It's efficient – a fossil fuel equivalent of 450 miles per gallon.

It's compact, designed to take up no more space than the average person.

Shaq (though not an average person) uses a Segway to wander the halls of his gargantuan home.

The turning radius is zero.

It's really fun.

It also means independence for children and adults with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and other conditions that affect mobility.

I can easily envision a day when shops and cafés are outfitted with complementary charging stations for their customers, a day when parking meters are obsolete, replaced by curbside Segway meters, where for a quarter you can plug in.

The hardest part of living with a Segway was having to return it. When I finally climbed back into my car, it took me an instant to remember that a Volkswagen doesn't move just because I lean forward.

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HOME OF THE WEEK
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In Santa Monica, Segways are available for purchase or rent at Segway Los Angeles, 1660 Ocean Avenue. Call (310) 395-1395, or visit the website, www.segway.com.