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Human on a stick

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*Humans on sticks ascend West River
Road near Mill Ruins Park.*

An innovative tour
company lets you see
Downtown via Segway

It's a concept that pairs history with a taste of the future: A tour of the city's historic riverfront aboard a futuristic Segway scooter that makes you feel like a Jetsons character.

If you can get past the nerd-factor and the heckles teen-agers toss your way, you're in for an entertaining ride.

Bloomington residents Bill and Emily Neuenschwander are the entrepreneurs behind "The Magical History Tour" -- a.k.a. "Human on a Stick" -- that recently opened in St. Anthony Main on the river's East Bank. The Neuenschwanders use a room next to the Aster Caf/, 125 Main St. SE, which houses stand-up comedy at night.

Their company has 21 scooters -- the nation's largest Segway rental fleet, Bill claims -- for guided two-plus-hour tours along the riverfront.

The future isn't cheap -- \$69.95 per person -- but it sure is fun.

After a safety video and a short training course on an asphalt drain pan under the 3rd Avenue Bridge, even novices are ready to lean forward -- all it takes to propel the Segway on its adventure. The path takes riders over the Stone Arch Bridge, through the new Mill Ruins Park, into the Mill City Museum, along West River Parkway, over the Plymouth Avenue Bridge through Boom Island, and back through Nicollet Island to Main Street.

For those who may have missed the breathless hype about what was originally known as "It" and then "Ginger," the Segway Human Transporter (HT) is a self-balancing, electric-powered machine. Riders stand straight up on the scooter, which has gyroscopes and high-speed microprocessors that mimic human balance.

The machine is as intuitive as its hype promises; lean forward and you go forward, tilt back and you reverse. To stop, the rider stands straight up.

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Turning is the only thing that requires some thought: you twist the Segway's throttle-like left handle. If the rider keeps turning the grip, the Segway spins 360 degrees in place -- it can "turn on a dime," as the Neuenschwanders put it.

The Segways also seem to float over terrain, whether it's Main Street's bumpy cobblestones or the steep hill from Mill Ruins Park to West River Parkway.

The Neuenschwanders liken Segways to "magic carpets" -- a description they heard recently on National Public Radio.

"It's kind of like gliding on the top of air," said Emily Neuenschwander. "I still think it's amazing. It gets my endorphins going."

In the world-weary tone of wives of gizmo-crazed husbands everywhere, Emily admitted she had some initial hesitation about the Segways. Bill, a self-described techie, was the first one to really become obsessed with the scooters.

He flew to Florida a year ago to buy his fleet. One Segway cost \$5,000; the price has since dropped to \$4,500.

"It feels like an extension of your body," said Bill, whose eyes still light up talking about the Segways.

The Neuenschwanders have invested more than \$150,000 in their company, Mobile Entertainment LLC. Besides tours, they organize Segway rides for corporate "team building" events. The couple pulls in between \$1,500 to \$8,000 for the corporate gigs (with \$8,000 being an exceptionally profitable day). History tours depart Thursdays to Mondays whenever the weather is right and there are enough riders to justify it.

The couple insists on joining novice scooter riders during the tours, and Bill's enthusiasm appears undimmed even after dozens of rides. The couple doesn't plan on renting their rides out without the assistance of Segway experts.

They take pains to ensure Segway riders are polite and don't take on an "SUV of the sidewalk" mentality. On the narrow Plymouth Avenue Bridge between Downtown and Boom Island, they even pull over and stop so bicyclists can pass.

Under state law, a Segway operator has the same rights and responsibilities of a pedestrian but can travel on streets where the posted speed limit is under 35 mph. (They can also legally scoot inside buildings unless the owners post signs prohibiting it -- "they have to say 'no guns or Segways,'" Bill chuckles.)

Beginning scooter riders can spin out if they aren't mindful of the machine's quirks. The instructional video riders watch before their journey details some of the hazards. (At the end of the cautionary

tale, the somber narrator states that riding a Segway is "the coolest thing you'll ever do," which makes even Bill hoot.)

Wiping out has only happened once, Bill said (a kid tried to do a jump off a dirt mound). Riders can fall if they try to ride down steep hills sideways, descend stairs, turn abruptly or become reckless tricksters.

Color-coded metal circles turn on the scooters. They limit the Segway's speed to 5 mph for beginners, 8 mph for intermediate and for expert riders, 12 mph. (An hour into the journey, everyone seems comfortable at 8 mph, about three times as fast as walking.) The scooters have to be turned on before you stand on them; mounting a Segway not in "balance" mode is another good way to get ditched.

The "Human on a Stick" entrepreneurs allowed a Skyway News reporter and editor to accompany them on a recent riverfront tour. A family from San Jose, Calif., in town to see relatives, was among the Segway enthusiasts. The scooter trip ranked high on their vacation to-do list, even at \$280 retail for Mom, Dad and the two boys (minimum riding age is 13). As a grinning dad chased the two giggling boys around Mill City Museum's broad courtyard, it was apparent they considered the money well spent.

The tour has drawn all sorts of people, from history buffs to techies to a Harley Davidson motorcyclist obsessed with "anything on wheels," Bill Neuenschwander said.

The tour starts under the 3rd Avenue Bridge near the company's Main Street SE headquarters. After a few aimless loops around the asphalt -- where you get used to the machine and the bemused stares of passersby -- riders follow Bill in a single-file line, humming along sidewalks with a buzz at your feet that sounds like a high-powered electric toothbrush.

As you attempt to master of the art of Segwaying, you listen to historical tidbits about the area, including trivia about the flour giants, the Pillsburys and the Washburns.

It's hard to pay attention to the audio when you're first getting your footing on the Segways. Steering them straight can be a bit nerve-racking in narrow spots, such as the Plymouth Avenue bridge sidewalk.

That said, in many ways, a Segway is a superior touring vehicle. You can cover more ground than by walking, but not so fast that you feel things rushing by. Your back is straight, and your head is more naturally positioned to look around than on a bike, where you have to crane your head up. You can also literally turn on that dime (although a full charge, which covers several hours of Segwaying, is about 7 cents, Bill noted).

Minor downsides: the slug factor (a guilt-inducing lack of physical exertion), sore feet from standing in place, and the nagging

feeling that you look like a complete dork (mitigated by smugness that you know something the hecklers don't).

The Neuenschwanders plan to add a bike tour to their Segway offerings. People with electric wheelchairs can also come along and listen to the historical audio at reduced prices.

"That area has so much to deliver in terms of really good historical content," Neuenschwander said, adding he relies on Pioneer Press writer Larry Millett's book, "Lost Twin Cities," for much of the historical information.

The "Magical History" tours run Thursday-Monday, throughout the day. For more information, visit www.magicalhistorytour.com or www.humanonastick.com.

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