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...but in Paris, hop on a Segway

Why walk when you can adopt an altogether more futuristic form of transport, asks Mark Hodson

As I stood in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower on my own personal transporter, two emotions fought for supremacy. The first was a sense of exhilaration: here I was at the controls of one of the world's most sophisticated pieces of gadgetry, ready to glide around one of the world's most beautiful cities. The second was a cringing sense of embarrassment: everywhere I turned, people were staring at me. Some were pointing and laughing out loud.

Launched in America in 2001, the Segway travels at speeds of up to 12mph, covering about 10 miles on a single electric charge. Although it looks clumsy, it contains a collection of gyroscopes, sensors and microprocessors that allow the user to balance effortlessly on two wheels. Operating it is a simple matter of shifting your bodyweight backwards or forwards.

In America, where Segways sell for £2,600, the machines have acquired something of a cult following. Thousands of office workers use them to commute, several police forces and postal services have run trials of them and even the Pentagon has reportedly bought some.

So it was only a matter of time before some bright spark came along with the idea of hiring them out to tourists. That bright spark is David Mebane, an American living in Paris, who claims his company, City Segway Tours, is the first of its kind in the world. His three-hour escorted tours have proved so popular that he now plans to roll out the concept in cities across the world. Earlier this year, he introduced Nice and New Orleans, with Chicago and Washington DC following close behind. Other operators are now offering tours of Bangkok, Minneapolis and Waikiki.

It might be tempting to suggest that Segways represent the future of tourism — no more trudging around town — but one big hurdle stands in the way: most cities regard the machines as motorised vehicles and ban them from pavements.

So London is out, but Paris is in. Mebane has managed to persuade the French authorities that a Segway is equivalent to an electric wheelchair, and can, therefore, be ridden on pavements and pedestrian bridges, in cycle lanes and parks, and — where necessary — on roads. Safety is taken very seriously.

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Before setting off, riders must sign a lengthy waiver form, put on a helmet, pay a £300 deposit and agree not to use a camera or camcorder.

My guide, Aaron Rodgers, explained that the rules had been tightened after a series of collisions with pedestrians. One woman had been adjusting the zoom on her digital camera and hadn't realised she was leaning back, which sent the Segway into reverse and she went clattering into an elderly lady. Rodgers still winces when he recalls the savagery of the victim's colourful invective.

Most Parisians have a more benign reaction, as I found out when I set off with a group of eight other tourists — all American — following Rodgers, in ducking fashion, across the Parc du Champs de Mars. The effect was astonishing: couples taking a stroll stopped in their tracks and gawped at us; lovers on benches froze mid-kiss; tourists swivelled their cameras away from the Eiffel Tower (so passé!) and pointed them at us instead. Embarrassing, yes, but a change from the typical Parisian hauteur.

Mebane's tours are marketed as irreverent and untaxing on the brain. His brochure says: "Our goal is not to overwhelm you with mind-bending dates and boring stories." But I liked the story he told when we reached the Musée Rodin. An American visitor had asked an attendant in the garden to take his photograph, whereupon the tourist whipped off his clothes and, sitting at the base of The Thinker, adopted the familiar pose of chin on hand. Aghast at the American's audacity, the guard put down the camera, scooped up the clothes and tossed them over a high wall into the street. Which says a lot about both nationalities.

The route we took around Paris was ingenious, sticking mainly to wide, uncrowded pavements, but passing most of the key sights from the Ecole Militaire across to the Louvre. Riding the Segways proved both intuitive and fun: we were coached in how to negotiate kerbs, we mastered graceful 360-degree turns and, most of the time, we scooted along at about 6mph, quick enough to get around the city, but not so fast that we missed anything.

Ironically, the only time we came up against the curled lip of officialdom was when we stopped to gaze at the Place de la Concorde and the spot where Marie Antoinette lost her head. A uniformed guard told us to move on; we were outside the American Embassy.

- *Mark Hodson travelled as a guest of Eurostar and the Hotel Lancaster*

TRAVEL BRIEF

The tour: the Segway tours operate twice daily between March 1 and November 30, beginning at 10.30am and 6.30pm. They cost £50 and must be booked in advance and paid by cash or traveller's cheque. In the event of rain, waterproof ponchos are provided. The minimum age to ride is 12. Call 00 33 1 56 58 10 54, www.citysegwaytours.com.

Getting there: Eurostar (0870 518 6186, www.eurostar.com) has returns from Waterloo to Paris from £59. The latest airline to fly to the

French capital is Jet2 (0113 285 6488, www.jet2.com), which begins services from Leeds-Bradford on September 1; returns from £48.

Where to stay: try The Lancaster (00 33 1 40 76 40 76, www.hotel-lancaster.fr; doubles from £326), an elegant 19th-century town-house hotel just off the Champs Elysées. Or the friendly Hôtel de Lutèce (01 43 26 23 52, www.paris-hotel-lutece.com; doubles from £105).

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