

Posted on Sun, May. 09, 2004

History on a stick

Hop aboard the futuristic Segway to get a sense of Minneapolis' past.

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Pioneer Press

Trains once rumbled across the squat Stone Arch Bridge in downtown Minneapolis' historic St. Anthony Falls district.

Today, pedestrians and bicyclists on the bridge are being joined by Segway riders in search of local history, with train noises and other old-city sounds piped through small speakers affixed to their electronic scooters.

The Segway historical caravans are dubbed Magical History Tours.

The guided tours are the work of a Bloomington entrepreneur who recently set up shop in the St. Anthony Main riverfront mall with his fleet of 21 scooters to entice passers-by into taking high-tech equivalents of walking tours around the Twin Cities.

Bill Neuenschwander of Mobile Entertainment LLC is starting in Minneapolis. His motorized excursions roll past the roaring St. Anthony Falls and the lopsided Pillsbury "A" Mill, across the Stone Arch and Hennepin Avenue bridges, through a once-workaday neighborhood now sprouting trendy lofts, with a stop at the new Mill City Museum for snacks and brief tours.

Neuenschwander has the east metro in his sights, too. After the Twin Cities' new light-rail line begins operating June 26, he intends to load his tour groups onto the trains in downtown Minneapolis for trips to historic Fort Snelling near St. Paul. He also is mulling guided tours around the state Capitol and along the St. Paul riverfront and Summit Avenue.

SEEING THE SITES

The upright, gyroscopically balanced Segways are ideal for historical excursions, Neuenschwander says, because riders can cover more ground than walking-tour participants who conk out after two miles or so. His two-hour Minneapolis tour covers more than five miles, partly along the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Trail, yet riders suffer no ill effects other than a bit of leg fatigue from all that standing.

Scott Lien, a supervisor at the ePredix tech firm in downtown Minneapolis, recently took more than a dozen of his software developers on a Segway excursion as a reward for completing a major project.

A scooter tour is more original than bowling, golf, lunch or drinks, Lien says, and "it worked well as a team-bonding thing."

The scooter tours are "a great hook for getting folks interested in the riverfront and history of the place," says David Stevens, the Mill City Museum's public programs coordinator. "Inherent interest in the Segways will bring people down to a great part of town with nice trails."

The museum is built in the limestone ruins of the Washburn "A" Mill, damaged by fire in 1991, and the area surrounding it is a key historical site. St. Anthony Falls is the Mississippi River's only major waterfall, evolving from a top tourist draw in the early 1800s to a lumber center and, later, the world's flour-milling capital.

HEARING THE HISTORY

Neuenschwander has harnessed technology to chronicle the area's past. His lead Segway is equipped with an FM transmitter that sends ambient sounds, vintage music and historical narrations to digital radios attached to the other scooters' handlebars.

Riders hear falling water, chugging trains, clanking street-cars and tapping telegraphs as a mellifluous voice — that's Neuenschwander's wife, Emily — tells them about Gateway Park, the Milwaukee Depot and a suspension bridge that linked the towns of Minneapolis and St. Anthony in 1854.

Those more fascinated with newfangled Segways than historic sawmills can switch off their radios — Neuenschwander won't mind.

His St. Anthony Main storefront officially opened Friday, but he started the tours weeks earlier and already has a busy schedule. He had planned to devote several days a week to a booming corporate-event business that often takes him out of state, but growing interest in his historical tours may force him to focus on those this summer.

"We'll do this seven days a week if we have to," he says.

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