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PIONEER PRESS

E-scooter smackdown

BY JULIO OJEDA-ZAPATA
Pioneer Press

One of my most sublime summer moments this year came on a gorgeous sunny day as I zipped along St. Paul's downtown riverfront, the warm wind whistling past my ears, on a motorized vehicle that made almost no noise.



Yes, it was an electric scooter. No, it wasn't a Segway Human Transporter (good guess, though). I'll get to that upright contraption in a second.

We're all conditioned to hear rumbling engines when moving on self-propelled vehicles, so the relative silence of an electric scooter is an unexpected delight.

So many kinds of electric scooters are now on the market, at so many prices, that almost anyone can help reduce noise and air pollution while getting from point A to point B.

About \$100 to \$300 will get you simple stand-up scooters at Target or Toys "R" Us for short trips at up to 15 mph (see accompanying story).

Things get more interesting at the high end of the electric-scooter market with an assortment of fancier adult models intended for serious commuting or errand-running.

I know, you're thinking of the Segway, that gyroscopically balanced stand-up scooter that has generated far more publicity than sales at the

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moment but doesn't look to go away anytime soon. I spent time on a couple of \$4,500 i Series Segways over the summer.

I also begged time on a \$2,800 Equinox, a sit-down scooter with subtlety and style instead of in-your-face, hey-this-is-the-future-of-transportation Segway swagger.

It was on the Equinox that I took my transcendent jaunt along the riverfront and glimpsed the face of God, or possibly Ralph Nader.

FIRST UP: THE SEGWAY

I had long been eager to road-test the much-ballyhooed Segway, created by famed inventor Dean Kamen, and Bloomington-based Mobile Entertainment gave me my big chance.

I blew it (at least at first). The Segway-rental company was selling scooter rides during the Minnesota State Fair, so I eagerly scrawled my name on the form that absolved the firm of legal liability in the event of an accident.

"Thank heavens for that," Mobile Entertainment founder Bill Neuenschwander would have been entitled to mutter after I stepped onto one of his pricey vehicles and promptly propelled into a parked car.

The Segway has a gentle learning curve that involves learning a few unfamiliar yet (for most people) easy-to-grasp habits. One of them: Avoiding an imminent crash often involves gently but firmly pulling back on the handlebars to bring the scooter to a quick halt instead of trying to turn away from the looming obstacle.

That's exactly what this klutz did.

Imagine Lando Calrissian in the Millennium Falcon during a climactic "Return of the Jedi" scene when he's zooming towards the enemy Death Star but suddenly realizes he's led the Rebel Alliance fleet into an ambush. "It's a trap!" he says. Veer off, veer off!

Now replace that scene with Julio on a Segway in a driveway near the fairgrounds and you can picture what happened. As I approached a sedan, I panicked and tried veering off instead of calmly leaning backward. Sure enough, I smacked into the car.

No harm done, but Neuenschwander looked a bit shaken as he took me aside for a bit of remedial training.

My next Segway opportunity came in St. Paul when Neuenschwander, probably against his better judgment, brought over two of his scooters so we could spend a few hours testing their capabilities in and around downtown St. Paul.



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This was the big time because I was graduating to the red key. Each Segway is started by one of three electronic keys that are fitted momentarily into a circular slot to activate the vehicle's computerized propulsion system.

At the State Fair, I was on the black key that kept me to 6 mph and a slow spinning rate — that twirl-in-place motion that occurs when the Segway's left handle is twisted aggressively (less-drastring twisting turns the scooter left or right). The red key upgraded me to 12.5 mph and a dizzying spin rate.

Yeehah! Neuenschwander and I scooted down four levels of a downtown parking ramp, to the consternation of motorists, and then zipped along sidewalks to paved riverfront trails across from Lowertown.

There, after briefly pondering which of two parallel paths to take — does a Segway belong on a bike trail, with other two-wheeled vehicles, or on a walking path, with upright humans? — I put the scooter through its paces.

Traveling in a straight line is easy. Lean forward and the Segway accelerates. Lean backward to slow down, stop or move in reverse. Don't get cocky, though, or the scooter will show you who's boss.

When my top speed began to seem plodding and I tried eking more mph, the scooter forcibly leaned me backward (the party pooper). It wouldn't let me go too fast while in reverse, either, without vibrating angrily.

Neuenschwander got that nervous look again when I tried a few fast turns and came close to wiping out several times. Turns out a bit of artful body leaning and knee bending is required, which takes practice.

Our Segways attracted a lot of attention, not all of it positive. "That's just dumb!" an elderly lady declared when we glided into a downtown Starbucks for scones. But when maneuvering the scooters into a residential complex and up an elevator, the building manager yelled from her office, "I want one!"

Over by downtown's main post office, Neuenschwander got to chatting with two postal workers. You may use these someday, the entrepreneur told them. "If it makes sense, we'll never get 'em," one man replied.

I came in for a bit of ribbing weeks later when Segway LLC issued a voluntary recall of 6,000 Segways after a handful of accidents that reportedly occurred when scooters ran low on power and their balancing systems failed.

"Remember the exploding Pinto?" one co-worker quipped in an e-mail. "Bwah-ha-ha-ha!"

VESPA, MEET EQUINOX

The Segway, while a hoot, made me wish for something a bit speedier. Enter Electric Vehicle Technologies and its Equinox, which maxes out at 30 miles per hour.

Getting EVT to ship me one of the Vespa-like scooters was a no-go at first, but the firm agreed after a bit of sweet-talking — and even sent along two staffers, including company president David Haskell.

What they didn't send was a helmet. "Sorry, guys, safety first," I said, so we made a quick trip to Bob's Cycle Supply for a snappy black number.

Now we were ready to rumble. Wait, make that no rumble. The first thing I expected when settling onto the traditionally styled scooter and turning the ignition key was a growling engine, but the Equinox came alive with merely a beep.

When I twisted the throttle, the Equinox sprang forward without hardly a sound. This didn't seem strange with the futuristic Segway but did take some getting used to with a scooter that would look right at home in a subtitled Sophia Loren movie.

Soon enough, I was zipping around downtown. While the slowish Segway is best used on sidewalks, even though it can legally traverse city streets, the Equinox has just enough additional speed to hold its own in non-freeway traffic.

I ran a quickie errand on the thing, scooting to the West Side for a parcel pick-up and returning across the Wabasha Street Bridge in a reasonable if not startlingly short time span. I then ranged farther afield, shooting up to the Indian Mounds Park area overlooking downtown St. Paul before circling back along the riverfront's Warner Road. (God, meet Ralph.)

The Equinox is no Harley. I sometimes got a bit nervous on the underpowered scooter as cars shot by me on some of the downtown area's higher-speed arteries. And, as with the Segway, I became obsessive about monitoring battery levels out of fear of traveling too far and getting stranded.

I was more taken with the Equinox than with the Segway because of the EVT vehicle's greater range and speed — and because it just looks classier.

My enthusiasm did abate a bit when a female co-worker e-mailed me, "I saw it parked out back. It is SUPER cute!" Whoa, hold on, does any manly man want to be caught dead on something "SUPER cute"?

For dudes who respond in the emphatic negative, EVT has just the thing: the upcoming Ion with the Equinox's propulsion system but a more

sharkish appearance.

Wait! There's more, guys. A T-Rex scooter, also due in 2004, will have even sleeker styling and a more advanced propulsion system with a top speed of about 55 miles per hour — and we're sure the "T" is short for "testosterone."

Masculinity issues aside, the EVT scooter is notable in that it has no standalone engine with belts, pulleys, chains, drive shafts and the like. Its electrical propulsion system and body are essentially one, with exceptions such as batteries that must be swapped out on occasion.

EVT, based in Skokie, Ill., licensed the Equinox's propulsion technology from its Korean creator and currently owns exclusive rights to distribute it in North America. EVT claims to have sold out its first shipping container of 50 scooters, and it's now looking to set up dealerships around the country.

The T-Rex will be entirely EVT's baby, according to Haskell, a former aerospace engineer who designed the firm's other prominent product, the Elite electric bicycle, himself. EVT also is working on an electric all-terrain vehicle along with other products and technologies it is keeping mostly under wraps for now.

If the Equinox is any indication, EVT could have a bright future. The scooter moves at nearly three times the speed of an i Series Segway yet costs about half as much and goes nearly four times as far. (Note: Segway LLC recently unveiled a \$4,000 p Series scooter that narrows the price gap a bit.)

While the Equinox can't be used on sidewalks or taken into buildings, it strikes me as a more practical option for those who want cheap, environment-friendly wheels for commutes or errands.

The Segway might be more Minnesota-friendly because it can handle rougher off-road terrain, including, perhaps, snowy sidewalks, but I regard the Equinox as the better overall buy.

Just offer rocket launchers as optional accessories, OK, EVT? We guys gotta worry about our images.

Julio Ojeda-Zapata writes about personal technology. Reach him at jojeda@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5467.



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