

Client: Segway

Publication: Los Angeles Times

Date: December 23, 2004

Circulation: 1,164,338

Los Angeles Times

Just lean forward and let 'er roll

Since the first Segway stand-up scooters went on the market two years ago, they've been hailed as a vehicle from the future, ridiculed as a fad, banned in some cities and even recalled in late 2003. But with all the hype, few can say they've piloted one.

Now, for better or worse, this "unique self-balancing electric-powered transportation device" can be yours for \$45 an hour at the Santa Monica Segway dealership, the only official rental shop in L.A., Orange, Ventura and San Bernardino counties.

Before you can rent one, the staff gives you a tutorial. After some practice, it becomes second nature — more or less. Point your toes down; the scooter moves forward. Tilt your heels back; the scooter stops. The key is finding the sweet spot — directly over the center of the axle — that will give you maximum control, although it's not too hard to do. Turning a little dial on the left handlebar steers the Segway right and left.

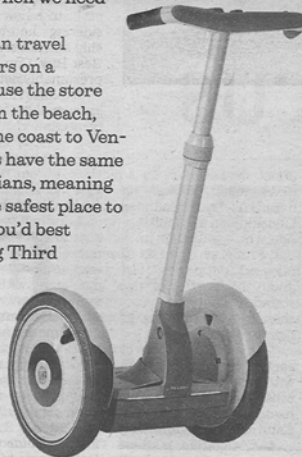
But is the future safe? "You really can't flip over," salesperson Abi Richie assures us. "Even on carpet it won't fly out from under you."

Each Segway comes with three color-coded keys that control the top speed. Turning the slowest key, the black one — top speed 6 mph — is good for letting beginners become accustomed to the vehicle. The yellow key lets you go 8 mph, but that's not fast enough to cause full-blown panic. The red key is perfect for that. It may not sound like much, but zipping along at 12 mph really ratchets up the pressure, especially when the only way to slow down is the very unintuitive "lean back" procedure. Where's the hand brake when we need it?

The Segway can travel three or four hours on a charge, and because the store is two blocks from the beach, traveling along the coast to Venice is easy. Riders have the same rights as pedestrians, meaning sidewalks are the safest place to travel. Even so, you'd best avoid the bustling Third Street Promenade.

— PETE
METZGER

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Segway
\$45 AN HOUR. Rent a Segway at the L.A. area's only official outlet.