



Yellow wheels of desire

By Brian Crisp

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AMERICANS love St Patrick's Day. Perhaps more than the Irish. And in San Francisco it's a very big deal.

The locals wear varying shades of green, not only on St Paddy's Day, but also on the day before and the day after. Restaurants dish up green eggs for breakfast and the whole city switches to party mode.

The Irish pubs, and there are plenty to choose from, are full. So are the patrons.

There is a massive parade. The streets are closed. Police officers, firemen and paramedics march behind Irish bands to the cheers of the thousands lining the main streets.

It's all the fun of a carnival. It's chaotic. It's congested.

And if I don't hurry up I'm going to be an unwelcome part of it. I'm not in green. In fact I'm wearing a large black helmet and driving a tiny yellow buggy. I'm not sure exactly how it must look but I'm either Big Bird on wheels or the yellow Wiggle rebelling against having to always drive the big red car.

About 100 metres in front of me the police are closing off the road. I accelerate. Nothing happens. I've already reached the buggy's top speed.

People point and smile and the police officer waits as my buggy, and that of Sarah's (she who drives slowly, safely and frustratingly stops at all traffic lights – even if they are green), escape the parade into the streets of San Francisco.

About 20 minutes earlier we had arrived at a garage near Union Square to pick up our GoCars.

The GoCars have been cruising San Francisco for just over two years. Two-seater buggies that offer GPS-guided tours, they are a brilliant concept that is now spreading to other cities. In fact GoCars have franchise deals available in Australia.

"Our CEO Nathan Withrington conceived the idea of a GPS-guided tour in 2003," spokesman Alasdair Clements said. "We hired an engineer to write the software code. It was rudimentary at first, but it worked. Since we started the company this software has evolved to become quite complex – a powerful toolset to compose and create a GPS-guided tour. As far as we know we were the first commercial application of this technology.

"We are working with a potential franchisee right now who is researching what it will take to launch a GoCar tour operation in Sydney."

The GoCars are bright yellow with go-fast black stripes and racing numbers. I'm told they have a top speed of 50km/h but that must be when they are going down a very steep hill.

They have three wheels, a small boot in which you store your helmets when you park and go walkabout, and rather than a steering wheel, it has motorbike handlebars.

The tiny cars scream "look at me" – and everybody does. People point. People laugh. For the most part fellow drivers are pleasant enough and the sometimes surly cablecar drivers are more than happy to yield to the GoCar – but more on that later.

There's no need for maps. The GPS – a woman with a sultry voice – talks you through the city's tourist high spots telling you where, and when, to turn.

After a brief safety talk and the obligatory signing of a form that basically says GoCars management is responsible for nothing, we head off.

When you hire a GoCar you can have it for the day. You can follow several predetermined routes or you can turn off the GPS and go it alone.

There are only a few rules: don't go on the interstate; don't attempt to go over the Golden Gate Bridge; and if the hill is too steep, be prepared to push. And, oh yes, there's no reverse.

"Our customers are amazingly resilient and creative in how they manage their experience," Clements said. "They call us every now and again asking questions and seeking technical assistance, but for the most part they return home happy. In the early days we had a few people cross the bridge to Sausalito."

I fire the engine by pushing a button and we chug off through the parade and down towards breakfast at Fisherman's Wharf. To be fair, San Francisco is an easy city to navigate, but it is absolute child's play when the car tells you what to do.

As we make our way to the wharf area the GPS points out buildings of historical value and promises that we will find the real San Francisco. But that will have to wait. It's breakfast.

The carpark attendant motions us to a special parking spot just outside the Boudin Bakery. As we sit outside by the fire enjoying scrambled eggs served in a sourdough bowl, we watch as a crowd gathers around our GoCars. People can't contain themselves. The cars are almost as much an attraction as the wharf.

Our appetites sated, we set off along the coast past Miami Vice star Don Johnson's restaurant, OJ Simpson's school and into the swanky part of San Francisco. It is here that the GPS refuses to tell us exactly which house comic star Robin Williams lives in. I'm guessing it was the big one.

Next stop the Golden Gate Bridge. On this day it was partly covered by San Francisco's famous fog but it is always a great place to grab some happy snaps. The GoCar takes you to some unusual spots which means that your photos are not necessarily the same as all your mates.

We then made our way through Golden Gate Park making stops at the flower conservatory, Japanese Tea Garden (you might recognise it from *Memoirs of a Geisha*) and the De Young Museum before heading into the neighbourhood famous for the "Summer of Love". Haight-Ashbury is a great place to park the GoCar to eat and explore. It still has that hippie feel to it, but some of the sharp edges have been smoothed.

You should allow about an hour. That gives you enough time to stick your head inside most of the shops and eat at the Squat and Gobble Cafe and Crepery.

By this time I'd become pretty comfortable behind the handlebars – until I turned the corner to head up the hill to the famous Lombard St.

Had I noticed the cablecar I would have let it go first. Too late. I was climbing the hill, slowing with every second, and the cablecar was getting larger in my side mirror.

Ding, ding. Ding, ding.

Who had right of way? I couldn't remember. Who cared. I gunned it. Crouched down (as if that would help) and prayed that my little car would make it to the top. How embarrassing it would be if I had to push it up the hill with the cablecar on my tail.

Then I noticed that the cablecar driver was roaring with laughter.

Ding, ding. Ding, ding.

Just then the turn for Lombard St, San Francisco's famous crooked street, appeared and I peeled off to the right. We were safe. About 10 minutes later we arrived back in the safety of Union Square. Tired and feeling slightly frazzled we joined the St Pat's punters for a well-earned drink.



GoCar action ... Sarah Nicholson of Melbourne manoeuvres her little yellow car through the streets of San Francisco. Picture: Alison Crisp

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