

For Wandering Tourists, Help from on High

By *TIM GNATEK*

Sightseeing tours in scenic San Francisco are as old as its cable cars and take nearly every imaginable form, from Chinatown ghost tours to rides in a 1955 Mack fire engine. But in a city whose signature is a playful mix of old-world charm and up-to-the-minute technology, GoCar Rentals' storytelling cars fit right in.

The geek-chic carts may be the first self-propelled example of a breed of smart devices that remove the guide from the tour, allowing visitors to explore and learn at their own speed.

The three-wheeled, two-seat GoCar, which is gasoline-powered, is made by Trigger Technics of the Netherlands. Customized with black racing stripes down its snub-nosed hood, the yellow vehicle sports the good looks of a Mini Cooper and weighs only 386 pounds.

Mounted in the rear of the cart, which narrows like a motorcycle sidecar, is a Global Positioning System unit and a computer data-base of audio clips about 105 San Francisco sights and features. When the G.P.S. system senses that the cart is passing one of the points in the database, the stereo plays a story or gives clear, occasionally imploring directions.

"If you wish to visit East Beach, turn right at the entrance. If not, continue straight," the cart offers from two speakers mounted under the dashboard. It pauses, then prods, "I would love to show you East Beach with its beautiful views of the bay and Golden Gate Bridge."

Charlie Sprung, a 47-year-old visitor from Brooklyn, said he and his wife, Hadassah, enjoyed having the cart help them navigate around the city.

"It's for the directionally challenged," Mr. Sprung said. "Me, I'm like a deer in the headlights."

Pat Barber packed himself, his wife and their two children into a pair of GoCars to form their own convoy. "It was a little unnerving at first, being so low and open, but the cars do see you. In fact, everybody waved to my daughter," said Mr. Barber, 43, a mortgage banker from Palm Beach, Fla. "We've done a lot on this trip, but this is great as a touristy thing."



The founders of GoCar Rentals know something about tourism here. Nathan Withrington, 31, a former technology recruiter from England, and his business partner, Alastair Clements, 34, a former investment analyst from Scotland, were once San Francisco tourists themselves.

"I fell in love with San Francisco and the tourist industry," said Mr. Withrington, who stopped in San Francisco on an around-the-world trip in 1998 and decided to stay, taking a buttoned-down job in the city's financial district before plunging into the city's \$6 billion tourism market.

Several companies were already offering cart rentals, he said. "I thought what would

make this experience different would be insert-
ing technology," he said. "Then things just fell into place."

After researching cart manufacturers and deciding that the Trigger would suit their needs, Mr. Withrington and Mr. Clements found an importer for the cart in Florida, and ordered eight for about \$6,000 each. They recruited a friend's wife to record the cart's monologue, and a software programmer to merge the G.P.S. and audio systems in two test vehicles.

After eight weeks of operation, the GoCar fleet of talking carts has grown to seven, operating from GoCar's garage in Fisherman's Wharf, the city's most popular tourist district.

More than 600 people have taken a 12-mile cart-guided city tour that for reasons of both scenery and safety sticks mainly to San Francisco's parks. The tour takes about two hours, although renters are encouraged to drive around for as long as they would like. GoCar rents the vehicles for \$40 an hour for the first hour and \$20 an hour each hour thereafter to licensed drivers 21 and older.

While no one has been injured in a GoCar several renters have damaged the carts, smashing nose cones and rear-ending others. To protect the company and the tourists, GoCar requires that renters wear helmets and seat belts and sign liability waivers.

But San Franciscans in the Marina district seem to have taken kindly to the GoCars. Competing tour operators say they are impressed by the carts' versatility, and they have attracted no official objections from policemen walking the beat.

There are, of course, still some kinks to be worked out. Directions and G.P.S. readings do not yet override the recorded tour monologue, so if you zip too quickly past the Palace of Fine Arts, the cart might still be chatting about the theater when it should be signaling a turn.