

Automated tour guide: Talking vehicle knows where riders are, what to tell them.

Benny Evangelista, Chronicle Staff Writer

Arizona residents Steven and Ginger Peterson were touring the streets of San Francisco for the first time, yet they became tourist attractions themselves because of what they were driving -- a small yellow talking car.

"That's what made it so fun. Everybody was smiling at us, doing a double take at us," said Steven Peterson after taking a spin in one of the vehicles from GoCar Rentals Inc. "We had a blast."

GoCar Rentals, located on Hyde Street near Fisherman's Wharf, rents three-wheeled, two passenger vehicles that look like a combination motorcycle and golf cart.

The Dutch-made Trigger Scooter Cars also bear a vague resemblance to the vehicles used for Disneyland's Autopia ride, perhaps a fitting new transportation option for a city that already offers tourists pedicabs, horse-drawn buggies, ferry boats and the fabled cable cars to the stars.

But what sets GoCar Rentals apart is the its use of the Global Positioning System (GPS), which gives cues for an onboard computer to play recorded information when the vehicle rolls by a historical landmark like the Cannery, Fort Mason or the windmills in Golden Gate Park.

The car also lets the driver know it's time to turn left or right or if the vehicle is in the wrong lane.

"Tourists can throw away the map and get about without getting lost," said Nathan Withrington, 31, GoCar Rentals' chief executive officer. The Englishman co-founded the company about a year ago with his friend Alasdair Clements, 34, the chief financial officer, who originally hails from Scotland.

The company began service April 10 with eight of the gas-powered vehicles, which cost about \$6,000 each. Business has been so brisk that GoCar has already ordered eight more scooter cars, which come with 50cc engines and have a top speed of 30 mph.

GPS, which uses a system of orbiting satellites to determine precise ground locations, is widely used for a variety of purposes, from directing farm tractors sowing seed to assisting golfers with their shots, said LeaAnn McNabb, a spokeswoman for pioneering GPS company Trimble Navigation Ltd. of Sunnyvale.



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But she said GoCar Rentals' use of GPS for self-guided tour vehicles appears to be a first.

The vehicles are controlled with a motorcycle-style handle, throttle and hand brakes. They are made by Trigger Technics BV of Leiden, in the Netherlands.

According to the California Department of Motor Vehicles, they are approved for use on surface streets, but can't be driven on freeways or roads where the top speed is 45 mph. Earlier this month, however, two women from Phoenix didn't realize that and drove a GoCar across the Golden Gate Bridge and back.

"They were just over the moon about driving across the bridge," Withrington said. But their excursion also prompted GoCar Rentals to post a sign reading, "Car not permitted on bridge" on the steering handle.

The fiberglass-bodied cars are 92 inches long and weigh 380 pounds. By comparison, a Honda Accord is 190 inches long and weighs 3,053 pounds.

Because the car is so small, both driver and passenger have to wear safety helmets and sign a waiver acknowledging that driving it is risky.

For registration purposes, the vehicle is considered a motorcycle, but because it has three wheels, it can be driven by anyone with a regular Class C driver's license, DMV spokesman Steve Haskins said.

GoCar Rentals, however, requires drivers to be at least 21 years old.

Last week, Clements said, he took back a scooter and refunded the money to a couple from Hong Kong when the driver began steering erratically because she was confused about what side of the road she was supposed to be on.

The company charges \$40 for the first hour, \$20 for each additional hour up to five hours, and no more after that.

The computer is programmed to direct driver and passenger on a two-hour loop around the Fisherman's Wharf area, out to the Marina District through Golden Gate Park and eventually down that part of Lombard known as the "crookedest street in the world."

Along the way, the computer plays recorded messages giving riders information, such as the fact that they are driving in the neighborhood of comedian Robin Williams or that liquefaction caused damage in the Marina District during the 1989 Loma Prieta quake, or that Lombard isn't even the crookedest street in San Francisco.

The tour takes about two hours, but the computer program also suggests other places that extend the trip. Withrington said the company plans to create more tours.

"It lets you get a quick glance at San Francisco in a short period of time," said Greg Rider of Baltimore. On Friday morning, Rider and his wife, Katie, rented two scooters so they could take their twin 6-year-old daughters, Alix and Kaela.

"We stopped at some of the viewing points along the way, but we stayed pretty much on the tour," Greg Rider said. "The most fun was the crookedest street."

Information about GoCar Rentals can be found at www.gocarsf.com.