



GoCar talks to tourists as it goes

By Gene Sloan, USA TODAY, July 17, 2004

SAN FRANCISCO — Carol Ireton of Dallas is giddy with excitement as she steps out of what just might be the nation's next big tourist sensation: a small yellow talking car.

"That was wild," she declares, whipping off the motorcycle helmet that is mandatory for renters. "I want a franchise."



GoCar Rentals, which operates out of a small garage in the

Fisherman's Wharf area, unveiled the unusual three-wheeled open-air vehicles in April.

Designed for vacationers who want an easy way to explore the city, they look a little like the kiddie cars at amusement parks. But their Disneyesque appearance isn't their most unusual feature. The two-passenger cars also come with a talking "tour guide" built into the dashboard.

Company founder Nathan Withrington, 31, a self-described motorcycle buff who loves to tinker, hit on the idea of tapping into the Global Positioning System so the car always knows where it is and can spit out recorded information as vacationers drive past attractions. The system keeps tabs on where the car is to within 17 feet and adjusts its talk accordingly. It even gives suggestions on where and when to turn to see more sights.

"This is such a great idea," says Ireton, who is vacationing with her husband and two daughters. They rented two of the cars, which have a top speed of 30 mph, to get an overview of the city.

"She tells you a lot of interesting stuff, and they're easy to drive. It was fun."

For now, the software Withrington has ordered for the cars includes information only on attractions along a

pre-designated corridor that includes Fisherman's Wharf, the Marina District, Golden Gate Park, the Presidio and Haight-Ashbury. Drive off the path and the cars go silent; drive back onto the path and they start talking again.

Withrington says he's working on new software that will expand the area in which the cars can operate. "The ideas we have for this are just phenomenal. The next generation of software will be able to support not only multiple tours but multiple languages."

Withrington, who is from Brighton, England, and has lived in San Francisco since 1998, quit his job as a technical recruiter 18 months ago to develop the business. His initial plan was to start out small with just eight cars, but already he's reconsidering.

"Things have moved so much faster than I thought. Our biggest problem right now is we're turning people away every day." He has ordered eight more cars, which should arrive any day from the manufacturer in the Netherlands. And he's already in talks to expand the concept to more cities.

"It gives vacationers the chance to see the city at their own pace rather than rushed along in a tour bus."

Vacationers can pay and go

GoCar charges \$39.99 for the first hour, \$29.99 for the second hour and \$20 for each additional hour with a maximum of \$130 a day. Information: 800-914-6227; gocarsf.com

One problem has been setting up a reservation system because renters are keeping the cars out longer than expected, leaving him with none in the shop. "People say they'll keep the cars out for two hours, and then they're gone all day."

Tracking them down, however, isn't a problem. The brightly painted vehicles are hard to miss as they buzz around, dashboards blaring instructions as pedestrians stop and stare. "People definitely were looking at us," Ireton says. "I guess we did stand out."