

Views and Vines

Touring Sonoma Wine Country

By Matt Villano

If only [George Jetson](#) could see me now. I think this as I zoom past rows of vineyards a few blocks from Sonoma Plaza, the main square in Sonoma, California, and lean into the handlebar of my Segway personal transporter to make it go faster.

The device, which looks like a cross between a glorified hand truck and an ATV, uses a series of computerized gyroscopes to balance itself as it moves along. It would fit right in on the futuristic show *The Jetsons*.

As I whiz around local surface roads at 12 mph, people walking and driving by tend to slow down and look at me incredulously, as if to say, "What the heck is that guy doing?"

Thanks to a local company, Sonoma Segway, what I'm doing is having the time of my life.

Over the course of three hours, my buddy Dave and I use these people-movers to explore nearly 10 miles of Sonoma County's namesake city. We swing by a couple of wineries. We visit a cheese shop. We tool around.

Our excursion demonstrates that there's more than one way to enjoy this part of California wine country. Historically a place to explore by car, Sonoma County is now home to a number of novel and exciting tours that offer different perspectives. Some tours let visitors experience the area by Segway, Land Rover, raft or foot. Others feature hot-air balloons, motorcycles, bicycles and horses (please see sidebar).

As a recent transplant to the Sonoma County town of Healdsburg, I've signed up for several of these tours to get better insight into life in my new home. My experiences are introducing me to an idyllic setting that I'm quickly growing to love.

Sonoma by Segway

Admittedly, the Segway tour was Dave's idea. He was visiting for the weekend from another part of the country and wanted to do something "different."

We met Sonoma Segway owner Hunt Bailie near Sonoma Plaza, gathering in a parking lot behind the Sonoma Cheese Factory, which I noted had fudge and gelato for post-ride refreshment.

Our excursion began with a brief tutorial. Bailie explained how computers and motors in the base of the device keep it upright and balanced. Next he showed us how to operate the Segway: Lean forward to move it forward; lean backward to move it back; straighten your body to slow it to a stop.

After he showed us how to manipulate a tiny knob on the left handlebar to turn, we zipped around the parking lot on shriek-filled trial runs.

Now we are following Bailie for nearly a mile along a paved bike path to the home of General Mariano Vallejo (1807-1890), a Gothic Revival-style structure. Named "Lachryma Montis" ("mountain tear") by the general because the 20-acre estate near the Sonoma Mountain foothills has a free-flowing spring, it is now part of the Sonoma State Historic Park.

Vallejo, a Spanish native, was a local legend who played a role in the transition of California from a Mexican district to an American state. He also designed Sonoma's main plaza and lived in town for more than 35 years.

From the Vallejo home, we ride through downtown, taking back roads past Sebastiani Winery and over to Buena Vista Winery, which opened in 1857 and bills itself as the oldest premium winery in California. Dave and I clamber off the Segways and follow Bailie to the tasting room. Our instructions: Taste, but in moderation. Visitors get to sample several varieties, ranging from a chardonnay to a syrah. Bailie varies the one to three wineries the tour generally visits.

The ride back includes a stop at Vella Cheese Co., located in a circa-1904 stone building and founded in 1931, making it one of the oldest independent cheese-making companies in the county.

In the 1920s, after founder Tom Vella emigrated from Italy, he developed recipes for a host of jack and dry jack cheeses. He worked at the Sonoma Mission Creamery for several years until a group of local dairymen persuaded him to start a cheese factory of his own. Vella's son, Ignacio, still uses his father's recipes.

The younger Vella is on hand the day we visit. He's wearing a leather fedora and passionately barking commands at some of his cheese rollers. When pressed, he explains why he believes his cheese is the best, uttering phrases such as "made with love" and "rolled by hand."

Then we taste it: The Toma (Italian-style soft jack) is creamy and delicious; the drier Golden

Bear Monterey jack crumbles like Parmesan.

Carefully, we load our cheese purchases into the small canvas bags hung on the front of our Segways, and zoom back toward the tour starting point. By now, Dave and I feel completely comfortable on the people-movers, and we like to think we command them with the skill of NASCAR drivers.

By the time we reach the parking lot, we are giggling like schoolkids. The entire way home, we fantasize about owning Segways of our own.

Send the Rover Right Over

While speeding around on two wheels is always fun, I have to admit that, as a truck guy, I relish crunching over gravel in four-wheel drive even more. Perhaps that is why I love "roughing it" around wine country in a tricked-out, open-air Land Rover from a company called Vine Rover Tours. My wife, Nikki, and I enjoy a six-hour, charged-by-the-hour guided Rover excursion in May, when several of our friends come to visit us for Memorial Day weekend. We feel like the tour blends the sophistication of a limousine with the sensation of an African safari.

When owner Jason Pelm pulls up in front of our house around 11 A.M., the three men in our group coo, yes, coo: This truck isn't something you see every day. The vehicle was born a 1994 Defender 90, a model Land Rover no longer sells in North America. Since purchasing the vehicle in 2003, Pelm has paid a body shop in Petaluma to install padded bench seating along both edges of the truck bed, plus a roll cage for safety. He also had the body shop strap on a canvas cover to shield guests from the sun, and extend the truck body with a boxlike addition that reaches several feet past the back wheels and has a forward-facing bench.

Securely belted into our seats, we set out from Healdsburg and head north into the Alexander Valley. This 22-mile-long valley—which includes a section of the Russian River and was named for circa-1850 landholder Cyrus Alexander—is home to more than 40 wineries. The tour visits approximately four to six of them.

As soon as Pelm turns the Rover off Highway 128 and up the gravel driveway to Stonestreet Winery, a vineyard worker who has never seen anything quite like our truck flags us down and asks if we will photograph him and some buddies in front of the taxicab-yellow vehicle.

We receive similar reactions from workers and visitors alike at different wineries throughout the day—Sausal, Alexander Valley Vineyards and Hanna, to name a few.

At every stop, Pelm parks the vehicle and waits patiently as the eight of us go inside to taste and buy wine. When we emerge, he is waiting for us with fresh bottles of ice-cold mineral water. He also helps us store our purchases in bins beneath our seats. (Note: Each bin holds only one case.)

Around midafternoon, Pelm takes us to White Oak Vineyards & Winery, where we taste several wines. Then he drives us to picnic tables under an old oak tree at the winery. In this scenic spot, he helps us set up a late-afternoon picnic lunch with sandwiches and chips we've brought from home, and some of the wine we've purchased from White Oak. We laugh and linger for a while, then return to our chariot for more of the Alexander Valley's best.

In addition to offering customized, private tours, Rover Tours offers standard five-hour tours.

Riding on the River

On another day, after autumn has arrived, Nikki and I float down the Russian River, exploring Sonoma County in an inflatable canoe that we've rented from Russian River Adventures in Healdsburg. Nearly half-a-dozen outfitters along the 40-mile stretch of river from Geyserville to Guerneville rent canoes and kayaks by the hour and day (guided tours are also available), and Russian River Adventures in Healdsburg makes its own vessels.

Russian River Adventures owner Larry Laba, who markets the watercraft under the brand "SOAR" (Somewhere On A River), calls them "inflatable canoes" because they are approximately the same dimensions as a traditional canoe.

Following check-in at the Russian River Adventures offices south of downtown Healdsburg, we walk across the Healdsburg Avenue Bridge and put in just below Healdsburg Veterans Memorial Beach.

Our destination: a haul-out 8.5 miles away near the Wohler Road Bridge in Forestville, where river guides will meet us, help us out of the water, and drive us back to Healdsburg to pick up our car.

We push off and practice our navigation skills—acceleration, teamwork, turning on a dime—in a 200-foot-wide section of the river. These skills are tested almost immediately after we begin paddling in earnest, when a short section of modest rapids under the Highway 101 bridge

turns the boat around and nearly dumps us in the drink.

The river calms significantly from here, its current guiding us as we paddle away from civilization. Within minutes, we are moving past green brush, and trees such as willow and black walnut, on either side of the riverbank. Save for an occasional burble from the river, birdcalls are the only sounds we hear.

As we paddle southwest in the direction of the Pacific, we repeatedly ask ourselves, "Where *are* we?" The lasting impression of the journey is quietude: We don't see another human until the end of our four-hour trip.

While muscling onward, we pass various marvels. On a log near the riverbank, I spot a bale of western pond turtles sunning in the midday heat. Farther along, about an hour into the trip, Nikki alerts me to the presence of a gigantic great blue heron, just at the moment the pterodactyl-like bird gracefully takes flight.

Sometime around 1 p.m., Nikki and I haul out on a gravel bar and dive into a picnic lunch of sandwiches we bought at Oakville Grocery in downtown Healdsburg. After we resume our run, Nikki reclines in the front of the boat to do her best turtle impression while I take over all the paddling duties for a while.

Toward the end of our journey, the river widens to about 700 feet; the current quickens; and navigation becomes more challenging. Every time I try to steer, the inflatable turns around in circles. Rather than fight the water, we let it carry us, stowing our paddles and floating for the final mile or so. That strategy is all the better for admiring the giant redwoods that appear along the banks the last mile-and-a-half of the trip.

As we get closer to the Wohler Road Bridge, I direct Nikki's attention to the manicured rows of a vineyard peeking out over the top of the riverbank. If we squint, we can make out plump little grapes hanging in bunches beneath the leafy green vines.

"If I were a grape," Nikki says wistfully, "I'd want to grow here."

Strolling Through Time

I've long appreciated the additional sense of a city that I gain by exploring it on foot, so it's only a matter of time before I sign up with Healdsburg Walking Tours for a guided trek around my new hometown.

The hardest question is: Which walk to take? Founder and Healdsburg native Darla Meeker offers three different options: an extensive walking tour of historical homes and gardens, a stroll to some of the city's haunted buildings, and a jaunt that revolves around tasting some of Healdsburg's renowned food, wine and chocolate.

I opt for the tour that feeds body as well as mind: the two-hour, two-mile food, wine and chocolate tasting.

The tour begins promptly at 11 A.M. on Healdsburg Avenue. After explaining to our tour group that Healdsburg's main industry evolved from the prune business in the 1920s to wine in the 1930s and 1940s, after the end of Prohibition, Meeker leads us into Toad Hollow Vineyards to taste the fruit of that change: a crisp, honey-sweet sparkling wine dubbed "Risqué." The wine was named in homage to the Paris cancan, which Toad Hollow says was called "Le Ballet Risqué" in the 1830s.

From Toad Hollow, we wander farther north on Healdsburg Avenue to Costeaux French Bakery, a local institution since 1923. Inside this loftlike space, owner Will Seppi and his father, Karl, have been baking hearty sourdoughs and chewy ciabattas since 1981.

The duo's molasses-sweetened multigrain batard has won "Best of Show" at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair for three years running. When we taste the bread, we see that it really is that good.

The Seppis have also appeared in the Guinness World Records book for their work on the world's largest pumpkin pie, which they baked in their oven in partnership with the nearby Windsor Farmers Market and Windsor High School culinary arts program. The 6-foot-diameter aluminum pan used for the 418-pound pie in 2004 still hangs on the wall inside. An even larger pie from a bakery in Ohio eclipsed the Seppis' record in 2005.

Later in the tour, Meeker takes us to the Flying Goat Coffee outpost on Center Street. This local chain—named after an Ethiopian legend about a goat that eats coffee beans—roasts its own coffee, and has retail outposts in Healdsburg and Santa Rosa.

The brand also has become famous for its secret-recipe Goat Bar—a fudgelike brownie that we get to try and that we complement with tiny cups of freshly brewed java.

Over the next hour or so, our group follows Meeker into several chocolate shops, wineries and restaurants. At one point, in front of a colorful mural depicting town founder Harmon Heald,

Meeker notes that in 1856 Heald purchased most of the area that is now downtown Healdsburg.

Our walking tour of Healdsburg ends at Rosenblum Cellars, a boutique winery adjacent to the local police station.

After telling us how veterinarian Kent Rosenblum founded the winery in 1978, our friendly server pours us a number of signature wines, including the 2007 Kathy's Cuvée viognier and the 2006 Planchon Vineyard zinfandel.

We conclude our tasting with tiny pours of the Désirée chocolate dessert wine, a fortified port with a more-than-subtle aftertaste of hot fudge. Holding her glass aloft, Meeker utters a toast: "To Sonoma's bounty." I couldn't have said it better myself. n

Matt Villano is a freelance writer and editor based in Healdsburg, California. He learns something new about his home every week.

Horizon Air (800-547-9308, www.horizonair.com) flies daily to Santa Rosa, gateway to Sonoma County and Napa Valley wine country. For more information on Sonoma County, contact the Sonoma County Tourism Bureau at 800-576-6662 or 707-522-5800; www.sonomacounty.com.

More Tour Options

Here are just a few more of the many wonderful ways to explore the beauty and grandeur of California wine country:

- Various wineries offer tours of their operations. For instance, **Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery's** by-appointment tour includes a stroll through its renowned gardens and an up-close look at its Healdsburg vineyards, as well as nominal-fee wine tasting. The winery also offers a variety of themed tastings, such as tastings for white-wine lovers and tastings focused on wine aromas. 800-831-0381; www.ferrari-carano.com. Winery owners Don and Rhonda Carano also own the luxury, award-winning Vintners Inn, 800-421-2584, and John Ash & Co. restaurant in Santa Rosa, 707-527-7687; www.vintnersinn.com.
- There's nothing quite like viewing vineyards in a balloon floating above the ground. Most flights operated by **Up & Away Ballooning** last about an hour, and the balloons usually travel three to 10 miles, depending on wind currents. Your balloon tour also comes with a champagne brunch at Kendall-Jackson winery. 707-836-0171; www.up-away.com.
- Visitors pick up bikes, helmets and directions at **Wine Country Bikes'** Healdsburg headquarters for one- to seven-day self-guided tours, which follow designated routes from inn to inn throughout wine country. Many tours include some prearranged meals. 707-473-0610; www.winecountrybikes.com.
- **Vineyard Riders** runs one- and multiday tours for licensed motorcyclists. Rentals are also available. Nonmotorcyclists can ride in the chase vehicle on the company's Northern California tour, which includes vineyard-covered landscapes and ends with a day of wine tasting. 707-483-7363; www.vineyardriders.com.
- **Armstrong Woods Pack Station's** guided tours let visitors explore the towering redwoods of the 805-acre Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve by horseback. 707-887-2939; www.redwoodhorses.com. The reserve is near the renowned Russian River Valley wine country, home to numerous wineries, such as Korbel Champagne Cellars, famous for 126 years of champagne production, and for champagne that has been served at the last seven presidential inaugurations. —M.V.