

ON BALANCE

SUE CADE takes a turn
around Escot Park to
experience the singular
pleasure of a Segway Safari

A GREAT DAY OUT



I have only once before stood on a Segway. It was a brief encounter and although I didn't fall off, I can't say that I tamed the beast. So, the offer of a private session and a tour around the grounds of Escot Estate in East Devon seemed too good to miss.

Segways have been on the scene since the late 1990s, invented by New Yorker Dean Kamen after he saw a young man in a wheelchair struggling to get over a sidewalk. They are two-wheeled stand-on vehicles powered by batteries and manoeuvred using hands and body weight distribution. As a 'short-distance transportation alternative', they have healthy green credentials.

But rather than become a replacement for the daily car commute, Segways developed into an entertainment activity, a way of experiencing the countryside without putting in too much physical effort.

The Segways at Escot are provided by Devon Country Pursuits and I was placed in the experienced hands of Max Bennett, who was to train me and photographer Andrew Butler before we embarked on our all-terrain ride. Max kitted us out in protective gear and led us to the training track.

Getting onto a Segway is simply a case of taking hold of the handles and stepping up to the centre of the footplate. So far so good. But then comes the ‘Segway wobble’ with the machine swaying back and forth. Most beginners experience this wobble, but it isn’t hard to recover from and always raises a laugh. A good thing, as being relaxed – not rigid – is key. Max tells us to think Michael Jackson in his *Smooth Criminal* video, leaning the whole body forward gently rather than bending. For some reason I find myself humming *Thriller* instead, but it seems to work just as well.

‘This was an exhilarating experience, and I leave with the intention of bringing my teenage offspring to try the Escot Segway experience very soon’

The training track is a circular course with a few bumps and muddy patches. The speed is initially capped at 5mph but even so, being cautious, I took it as steady as steady can be. Experienced biker Andrew, however, moved confidently away ahead of me, eager to put the Segway through its paces.

Having successfully passed the training, we set off. We were fortunate to have piercing blue skies and glorious sunshine; conference and wedding venue Escot House basked in the rays as we zipped past – now at the upper speed of 12mph – adjacent to a sea of yellow buttercups. The Kennaway family has been



ABOVE: Sue Cade tries out the Segway course at Escot

in residence at Escot for well over 200 years and the current occupants, Sir John-Michael and Lady Kennaway, are dedicated to keeping the estate as a natural place. Wildflowers abound, as do champion trees dotted through parkland that was designed by Capability Brown. There are 1200 acres of the estate to explore, with miles of private trail including on and off-road tracks. I slow down when we take an uphill track, slightly nervous of the uneven surface, but I needn’t have worried. Segways are extremely stable so long as you stay relaxed and maintain a good balance. I follow Max’s trajectory as he demonstrates slalom manoeuvres. Devon Country Pursuits offers a ‘Segway Olympics’, which I imagine must be great fun for families, groups

of friends and colleagues on a teambuilding day.

It is late spring, and as we turn off into Black Aller Woods our senses are assaulted. The woodland is awash with bluebells, late this year and giving out an intoxicating scent. We take a dedicated path through the woods, carefully avoiding tree roots that could result in a face-plant into the undergrowth. Max guides us to a natural ramp in the track – the ‘Segway Jump’ – and I try it a few times, gathering speed as my confidence grows.

Coming out of the woods we travel along a level track, hacking along at top speed now we are Segway experts. Turning has become second nature and we whip the machines around to appreciate a view of the house across the parkland.

By the time we head for home I feel that I have the makings of a champion Segway rider. Ahead of me, Max takes his hands off the handlebars in a victory-style salute and feeling absurdly confident, I (briefly) do the same. Fortunately, Andrew fails to capture my alarmed expression on camera.

This was an exhilarating experience, and I leave with the intention of bringing my teenage offspring to try the Escot Segway experience very soon. A superb way to get out in the fresh air and see a beautiful part of Devon. ♦ devoncountrypursuits.co.uk escot-devon.co.uk

SUPER SEGWAYS

The first Segway was made in 1999

 Traveling downhill or decelerating generates electricity, recharging the batteries

 There are no engines, brakes or steering wheels

 Segways can only be used on private land in the UK

 Usain Bolt was knocked over by a photographer on a Segway at an athletics track

Segways operate well on a variety of surfaces, including muddy conditions

 They have a top speed of 12.5 mph, around twice the speed of the average walker

 They can outpace a squirrel at full pelt – even the red squirrels at Escot

 Martial arts star Jackie Chan uses a Segway

 A Segway features in comedy movie *Mall Cop* (watch it, it’s great fun)