

Wheelin' the Waterfront

What Makes the Tourists Spin Those Silly Surreys



PAUL WELLMAN

The author (left) and his buddy Dirty, surprising themselves and others by taking one of these four-man bicycles out for a Saturday spin.

by **Matt Kettmann**

The whole scheme seemed somewhat doomed from the start. “Go rent one of those big bike things,” my editor said, “and tell the rest of Santa Barbara what it’s like to be a tourist in our own town.” Well, the instructions were a bit more complicated than that—consisting of trolleys and hotels and walking tours—but I couldn’t stop thinking about the bike thing, since I am one of the many in our seaside hamlet who usually laughs with disdain and pity at the drivers of such silly contraptions as they swallow my bike lane and deter my chosen path.

But why not, I figured, giving in to a secret desire to know what it is that makes those little multi-bikes spin. So my buddy Dirty and I went down to Wheel Fun at 22 State Street, where I proceeded to ask for a ride on one of “those silly bike things,” a non-thought-out, off-the-cuff expression that the attending employees seemed to swallow quite well. Soon enough, with photographer Paul Wellman on board, we took to the streets on the four-wheeled, man-powered beast, assigned with the bare instructions: “Stay on the beach path. No sand.”

Right away—armed with a sidewalk-wide bicycle whose metal frame provides utmost protection and whose horn can scare the freckles off a European backpacker—we realized that our little hog took precedence over everyone else on the Cabrillo Boulevard trail. We felt a sense of privilege that I assume comes with the market’s biggest SUV, a feeling that cannot be denied once at the helm of the monster. Yea, we cut people off and showed contempt for those unknowingly in our way. But such was life that day, our worries wiped away with infrequent brake usage and frequent close calls.

Our persistent pedaling—illustrated by pretty girls, overheard conversations, and pretty girls’ overheard conversations—took us to the Andrea Clark Bird Refuge, where we ran over some tanbark, scared some ducks, and got in some tourists’ photos. There was

something poetic about being Santa Barbarans and, due to lack of tourist etiquette, getting in others’ pictures—it felt just. We saw some people we knew at Café del Sol, but didn’t make much of an attempt to signal them, assuming they would never think that we’d be on one of those goofy bikes anyway.

After briefly considering crossing Cabrillo to head to Butterfly Beach, we turned back toward State, passing giraffes at the zoo and running Dirty’s shoulder into the bougainvillea spikes on the passenger side of the vehicle as often as possible. But before bringing that baby home, we nailed down another of Wellman’s assignments, which took us into the halls of the East Beach Grill to photograph a hamburger at the beach. Pitchers of beer there aren’t cheap, but the view is tops, especially with a fancy four-seater bike rig next to your table. So we downed a couple of \$14 pitchers, Wellman took his shots, and some more friends joined us.

At that point, the silly bike experience was proving quite worthy—Saturday afternoon, brews at the beach, behemoth bike in waiting. When we hit the road again, it was apparent that all the bikini-clad femmes were eyeing us, the big guys on the road, as in-line skaters, skateboarders, two-wheel bikers, and wide-eyed walkers evaded our menacing girth. (Okay, maybe it was the nonstop honking.) Dirty and I convinced Wellman and my other buddy to ride up front, thereby saving us the sweat of pedaling since the front guys can’t see when the back guys aren’t pedaling. They caught us once or twice, but we soon returned to Wheel Fun, parallel parking the surrey o’ shenanigans right in front.

Success was the scent of the day, for we’d attacked the belly of the tourist beast and emerged unscathed, our only scratches a newborn sympathy for those silly bikes, our only desire one more ride. I’d recommend giving those babies a whirl if you haven’t, especially if the waterfront is an untrammled path for you. There’s even a chance I may take the helm of a four-man cycle again someday, so keep your beach-walking self alert. ■