



Surrey rides introduced at Sponge Docks

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A local couple has brought one of the latest eco-tourism based attractions to the Sponge Docks.

Greg and Laura Stewart recently relocated to Florida from Michigan with a dream of operating an environmentally friendly business and enjoying the simpler things in life, like working together to peddle a surrey.

Greg worked in Michigan for the OnStar division of General Motors. He took advantage of a buyout offer to escape the rat race of corporate life and relocate to Florida to spend more time with his wife and family. Of course thoughts of sunny Florida winters made a big difference in the couple choosing the Sunshine State.

On a visit to Laura's parents in Sarasota, while searching for a business opportunity to justify their relocation, they came across the California-based firm Wheel Fun Rentals on the Internet. The firm promotes renting surreys as a green alternative to traditional forms of transportation that cause pollution. Avid bicyclists, the Stewarts loved the idea of starting a business on the cutting edge of eco-tourism, renting foot-powered surrey carts.

With Tarpon Springs' focus on environmental issues, it was the perfect place to start their business, they said. Laura said they fell in love with the business concept. Surreys are environmentally friendly and provide people with a fun way to cruise around a downtown, tourist or beach area. She added all the business people, tourists and locals in Tarpon Springs have been very helpful, warm and welcoming.

"We wanted to do something very green, new and different. It's something that families and friends can do together," she explained. "Peddling a surrey is a good way to get people to talk to each other again, exercise and work toward a common goal."

Greg Stewart said he enjoys having his own family business, where he and his wife can spend more time together. He is also especially looking forward to enjoying Florida winters away from the cold, ice and snow.

He noted his research showed northern Pinellas offered several opportunities for success due to its various recreational oriented locations.

Last week they opened Wheel Fun Rentals in a kiosk at the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange Shops on Dodecanese Boulevard. They rent surreys to locals and visitors who want to take a leisurely tour around the Sponge Docks. A route map of the Sponge Docks is provided advising surrey riders which streets to traverse, and to stay off nearby Alt. 19. The foot-powered carts have lights and seatbelts and can be used on local streets. One person steers while the driver and passengers peddle. Drivers must be licensed and at least 18 years old.

Surreys, without fringes on top, are rented by the hour and can accommodate one, two or several adults and children at one time. Greg said in this tough economy, where people are looking for inexpensive ways to have fun, the adventure they offer is very affordable. A double surrey can be rented for \$25 an hour, while a surrey for one or two is available at \$15 an hour.

"The surreys attract a lot of attention," Laura said. They have surreys available for tour groups.

To their surprise, some people have asked how they can purchase surreys in their fleet. Each surrey ranges in price from \$2,500 to \$4,000, depending on how long they have been in use. Since their business is new their surreys don't have many miles on them.

For longer or more arduous trips they also rent cruiser bikes, mountain bikes and train bikes. The Safety Harbor couple has plans to expand, someday offering surreys for rides at Fred Howard Park or in downtown Dunedin and Safety Harbor.

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