

Solar-powered pedal bus is the new way to tour Halifax

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The solar-powered pedal bus makes a trial run in Halifax before the run-up to its regular service that starts Wednesday. - Contributed

Pedal, stop, drink, eat. Repeat.

"We thought that we would do a progressive dinner tour on the bikes," co-owner Steve Arnold said of his solar-powered pedal bus that will hit downtown Halifax streets come Wednesday.

"We drive to the different restaurants where drinks and food are included. It's kind of a unique and fun way get around, have some good food and a few local beers and things like that at the different stops."

Arnold's company Ride Solar already runs a similar service in Charlottetown, an idea that came about while he was seeking a way to get customers to his solar boat dinner cruise and tour in Prince Edward Island. Arnold spent a couple of years converting and rebuilding a water boat from the 1967 Montreal Expo into the world's first solar-powered dinner cruise, in Charlottetown harbour.

He then researched how many people he could fit on a single bicycle to bring passengers to the boat.

“Pedal pubs from Europe kept popping up — 12 to 18 people,” Arnold said. “We inquired about a chassis from Europe. To fit our brand, we thought we would add solar panels on the roof and an electric-assist motor to make it easier to paddle up the hills.”

This year, Arnold forged ahead with two solar-powered pedal buses, one for Charlottetown and the other to be run by his partner, Jeff Bonang, in Halifax.

Party of six required

He said the cockpit of the pedal bus is similar to a car, with a steering wheel, brake, turn signals, a horn and an additional pedal to make the electric motor kick in. Arnold and Bonang will man the cockpits until staff are trained.

There are six bicycle seats on each side of the pedal bus, which measures about 4.5 by 1.5 metres. There is additional interior space for six people between the two rows of bicycle seats for a total capacity of 18 people. The pedal bus is also wheelchair accessible.

The pedal bus dinner tours, which start Wednesday and continue until the end of October, will initially run four times daily — at 11 a.m., 2 p.m., 5 p.m., and 8 p.m. The 8 p.m. run will be phased out as the days get shorter.

The tour starts and ends by the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic on Lower Water Street, continuing on Lower Water to Murphy’s on the Water, to Shuck Oyster Bar on Hollis Street and back to Halifax Distilling Company across from Maritime Museum. The bus will be transported to the starting point by trailer from Bonang’s Dartmouth home each day.

Dinner tours will take from 2.5 hours to three hours to complete at a charge of \$79 per person. At least six people will be required to sign up before Ride Solar books the tour online because the bus does require pedal power.

“You can rent the bike as a private limousine,” Arnold said, and for \$10 per person per hour, “create your own tour, spend what you want and take as much time as you want.” Again, at least six people are required and if the bike is rented for a private event, that time slot will be dropped from the online tour schedule.

The Ride Solar website says the pedal bus is safe, CE approved, and legal to be driven on the roads.

“On the road, it fits the definition of a four-wheel bike in the Traffic Safety Act. It’s legally a bicycle and does whatever a bicycle does.”

Arnold said he's been in touch with Halifax Police to address the introduction of a pedal bus that tops out at about 12 kilometres an hour to Halifax streets.

"I don't know if you've driven on Lower Water Street lately but you can't go faster there, anyway," he said.

Arnold said \$2 from every fare will be donated to the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre Foundation in support of Ride for Cancer.

Arnold said pedal bus operators in Canadian cities like Calgary, Vancouver and Montreal say that local groups are the most common customer, using the bus for parties, sports teams get-togethers and other social activities.

"We want to get in for the next couple of months and then hit the ground running next year," Arnold said.

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