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A MINI vacation

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Sunday, September 21, 2008

John Sowell

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A line of Mini cooper automobiles winds its way down famed Lombard Street in San Francisco, a street know as the 'crookedest' in the world, during the recent Magical Mystery Mini Tour.

JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



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An Asian tourist poses for a photo at the bottom of the crooked section of Lombard Street in San Francisco as the owner of the 1976 classic Mini Cooper, Denver resident Kenn Lively enjoys the moment. More than 40 people gathered across the street to watch as 300 Minis headed down Lombard.

JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



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Hillsboro resident Sally Bousios and passenger Molly Osborne drive through the parking lot of a west San Francisco beach before an early morning group run through the city.

JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



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Mini Coopers line the parking lot of a park at Treasure Island with a view of the San Francisco skyline in the background.

JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



Sometimes described as a "bowl of jellybeans," Mini Coopers come in a variety of bright colors.

JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review

SAN FRANCISCO — A crowd of about 40 people suddenly materialized on Leavenworth Street in the Russian Hill neighborhood on a recent Sunday morning as a line of British-made Mini Coopers slowly traversed the tight turns on the famously crooked section of Lombard Street.

An Asian tourist stood off to the side where the cars paused momentarily for a stop sign before continuing on the straight portion of Lombard or turning onto Leavenworth. The woman snapped a few photos, then stepped onto the brick pavement to pose next to a classic 1976 Mini.

The car's owner, Denver resident Kenn Lively, smiled as the woman stood at the front corner of his car and reached out with her right hand to touch the hood, or what Britons call the bonnet. She waited until her companions had time to capture several photographs of her.

More than 300 Minis drove down that section of Lombard Street, known as the most crooked road in the world — even though another, less picturesque San Francisco street follows a steeper hill — as part of the Magical Mystery Mini Tour.

The participants including 41 Mini owners and guests from Oregon and Washington, along with several from Nevada, Colorado, Texas and even Iowa, Michigan and Minnesota.

One couple, Stuart Cox and Angelina South, came all the way from London, although understandably, they had to leave their Minis at home. They had already planned to drive across the United States and used the San Francisco gathering as a starting point for that trip.

The Redwood Empire Mini Enthusiasts, a Mini Cooper club based north of San Francisco, organized the three-day gathering that let Mini owners mingle and look at each other's cars and take part in several road rallies through San Francisco, across the Golden Gate Bridge into Marin County and south through the Santa Cruz mountains.

When I went British 17 months ago and bought a Mini, I didn't realize how tight-knit a community had developed around the small car first designed in 1959 by Sir Alec Issigonis.

It didn't take long before I discovered that it was almost a law that Mini drivers had to wave to each other when they passed on the street. I never ran up against that when I owned a 1968 Chevrolet Camaro and later a 1969 Dodge Charger when I was in high school and a parade of Toyotas and Hondas later on.

I also learned that Mini drivers also like to get together on weekends and drive curve-laden highways they call "twisties."

The Roseburg-based Umpqua Minis organizes several Saturday runs through the year. Past trips have

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Hillsboro resident Keith LeWarne instructs a girl on how to steer his remote-controlled Mini, a replica of his 1969 classic Mini behind the pair.
JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



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The owner of this Mini Cooper brings his sense of humor to his personalized license plate and the set of miniature parking cones.
JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



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Eugene residents Brayden and Priscilla Erickson pose on a bench overlooking San Francisco from Mt. Tamalpais State Park, during a group drive to Marin County.
JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



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Winchester resident Tawni Henlin directs a vendor on the placement of a "Batteries Not Included" sticker on the back window of her 2007 Mini Cooper.
JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review



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A Mini Cooper owned by News-Review reporter John Sowell is framed against the San Francisco skyline in a photo taken from Treasure Island. The former military post, located off the Bay Bridge between San Francisco and Oakland, is open to the public and provides spectacular views of the Bay Area.
JOHN SOWELL/The News-Review

looks forward to seeing old friends at gatherings and forging new friendships. He and his girlfriend, Debbie Smith, also a Mini owner, met through their interest in the car.

"There's nothing like a Mini friend," he said. "They'll do anything for you."

Sally Boussios, another PDX Mini member who also resides in Hillsboro, wrapped the Mini gathering around a longer vacation in the Bay area.

"It was a good excuse to get out of town," said Boussios, whose mother, Nancy French, lives in Canyonville. French Field at the Myrtle Creek Airport is named after her late father, Eustace French.

Boussios bought her second Mini last summer, replacing a 2003 model. She once belonged to an Alfa Romeo club and she said Mini owners share many of the traits present in that club.

"Car enthusiasts come from a wide variety of backgrounds," she said. "It's always fun to see what people do with their cars."

Additional photos can be found at:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sowellman/sets/72157606081107597>.

• You can reach reporter John Sowell at 957-4209 or by e-mail at jsowell@nrtoday.com.

included Winchester Bay, Crater Lake and a back road drive to Eugene.

For Winchester resident Tawni Henlin, this month's gathering in San Francisco marked the first time she had joined together with a group of Mini owners anywhere.

"I had a great time," she said. "I had never been to a rally before."

An account sales representative for Quest Diagnostics in Roseburg, Henlin bought her 2007 Mini Cooper S last October. She said it was a little nerve-racking trying to keep up with the other cars in San Francisco traffic.

"San Francisco is such a big city and on the freeways, traffic doesn't go the speed limit," she said. Having a two-way radio, used by many clubs, helped Henlin and other participants stay on course.

She said she was struck by the friendliness of the other Mini owners at the gathering.

"I went down there not knowing anyone. But while I was there, I never ate a meal by myself," she said.

The gathering was held at Treasure Island, an artificial island located halfway between San Francisco and Oakland and accessed off the Bay Bridge. Treasure Island, named after the novel by Robert Louis Stevenson, who lived briefly in San Francisco, once served as a military base but was opened to the public 12 years ago.

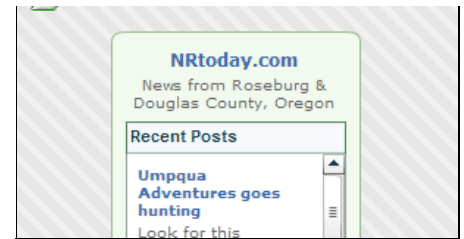
The island provides sweeping views of the San Francisco skyline, the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz Island and the Bay Bridge. Visitors can park and take in the vistas and also walk along the rock-lined shore.

A sliver 1969 Cooper owned by Hillsboro resident Keith LeWarne attracted a lot of attention. After adorning his car with strings of artificial jewels, LeWarne's car, Lucy, won the 1960s-themed gathering's "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" award, after the song by the Beatles.

LeWarne is a veteran Mini driver. He drove his silver 1969 Cooper for 38 days as part of the coast-to-coast Mini Takes the States road rally in 2006. He also owns a 2002 Cooper, built by BMW, which launched a new generation of Minis in 2001.

"I like the people. I like the cars," said LeWarne, a member of the Portland-based PDX Minis. "It's fun to be around these people."

He and his late wife were Mini enthusiasts. He has forged friendships with many other owners and



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kabadie wrote:

What a wonderful place to have a rally. San Francisco (and the Bay Area) is such a beautiful place. I can't remember how many times I've been down Lombard St-it was where we always took out of town visitors, or if me and a friend just wanted something "different" to do, that is one of the places we would go, along w/the Presidio, Golden Gate Park, Crissy Field, Ft. Point, and other places the tourists don't go (like the bunkers on the Presidio!). It was one of my favorite places to live, and next to Oregon, San Francisco IS the ultimate place to call home!

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John Sowell wrote:

It took place on Sept. 5 through 7.

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SouthernMan wrote:

I was just down there and must have missed this little trip. When was it?

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