

Tank Ride Makes WW II Come Alive

This might be a great way to attract crowds to a farm-based pick-your-own or tourism business. Bob Bowman, Princeton, Minn., sells rides in his World War II T34 Russian tank. It's a business he has been operating without competition for the past 7 years.

"As far as we know, this is the only operating World War II tank in the world that is available to the general public," says Bowman.

Customers are given authentic military uniforms to wear and receive a 20-min. crew training. Then they climb aboard the tank. The ride includes firing on and being fired upon by two enemy positions and riding around a 40-acre quarry with woods, hills and a pond.

"One member of the crew is the loader, another the commander and a third is the main turret gunner," says Bowman, who drives the non-hydraulic tank. "It's all controlled by hand and foot and a strong back."

The crew operates by the rules with the commander directing the loader to load the tank cannon. The gunner cranks the turret into position. When the round is fired, Bowman says it rocks the entire tank with the explosion. Blank rounds are filled with an oxygen, propane and diesel fuel mix.

After the 30-minute ride, Bowman es-

corts his guests to the machine gun range. Once they have put on bullet proof vests and eye protection, they are given 25 rounds to fire in their choice of several vintage, restored machine guns. Extra rounds are available for 50¢ a round. As anyone knows who has ever fired a machine gun, 25 rounds burn up real fast.

"People come for the tank ride, but most leave liking the machine gun range best," says Bowman. "We had a group of teachers, some of them anti-gun, come for the tank ride, but before they left, they shot up a 250-round belt."

Bowman says the ride attracts mostly guys, often to celebrate birthdays. While on the one hand he is surprised no one else has set up a similar business, he admits maintenance can be expensive. When a rear hub bearing went out, it cost him \$2,000 to replace it. He knows of a Panther tank that is being restored in California at an expected cost of \$2 million.

The original engine was the first successful aluminum block diesel engine. It had a split block with the bottom third cast iron, but the sleeves and head were aluminum.

"When it went out, it was a blessing, as it was very difficult to find parts," says Bowman. "I replaced it with a Cummins 250-hp engine used in five-ton army tractors."

Although the track and pins have had to



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be rewelded and bushings rebuilt, most of the tank is still original, including the aluminum transmission and the original rubber tires on the bogey wheels.

"Maintenance never ends," says Bowman. "I will spend 4 to 6 hours per week on preventative maintenance because I can't afford a breakdown when people have paid for rides."

Rides sell for \$125 per adult and \$115 for veterans and children. He grosses \$2,000 to

\$3,000 per weekend between May and October.

"It has been very profitable, but it takes a person who is able to fix things themselves," explains Bowman. "I couldn't have made it if I had to turn over maintenance to a diesel mechanic."

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Most customers want engravings to represent who they are, says Steve Girard's wife, Maria. They have a book of graphics or customers bring in photos of something to engrave.

Glass Etching Dresses Up Pickup, Car Windows

"If you're itching for etching, see Chigger." That's the catch phrase for Steve Girard, AKA Chigger, who runs a sideline business etching designs onto car and pickup windows and virtually anything else made out of glass or metal.

He got interested in etching after watching a friend do it. "Steve went home, bought some tools and started engraving on anything that would hold a design - including my kitchen canisters," says his wife Maria, laughing.

"When he started getting pretty good, he made etchings and put them in frames and sold them," she says, adding that they show his work at bike and car rallies. He also does mail orders.

They have a book of graphics clients can choose from or customers bring in photos of something they want engraved. Most want the engraving to represent who they are, Maria says, adding that Steve etches a lot of wildlife. "Sometimes, I think he becomes one with whatever he's engraving." Although he doesn't have an artistic background, he claims it's a gift from God.

Engravings are scratched lightly into the material so they last a lifetime. "It's not



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deep at all but you can feel it when you run your hand over it.

"When we add color to the etching, we put a wax over it which keeps the color from coming out," she says.

The amount of time it takes to do an engraving depends on the size, detail and whether or not the customer wants color added. This also determines the price. Maria says there's a minimum \$35 charge and it goes up from there.

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Rodeo School Offers "Experience"

Whether it's riding bucking bulls or broncos, Walker's Rodeo Co. of Lyons, Ore., offers a chance for people of all ages and from all walks of life, to learn or improve rodeo skills.

"What we do is give newcomers an opportunity to try rodeo, or for those with more experience, to get additional practice on the fundamentals," says Darian Walker. Walker and his wife Tami both have full-time jobs in town (a truck driver and a banker, respectively), but on the side, they raise bucking stock and operate what some have called a "rodeo school" in their 200 by 80-ft. outdoor riding arena.

In the summer months they hold "buckouts" each Sunday afternoon and Wednesday night, attracting riders with a wide range of skill levels. The winter season is limited to Saturday buckouts.

According to the Walkers, some riders get involved for their own entertainment, while others have aspirations of one day becoming pro rodeo competitors.

The couple charges each participant \$15 per ride, which is far more affordable than rodeo bull riding entry fees that can range from \$75 up to \$150 per ride. At rodeos, riders also have a lower chance of staying on the animals, since higher caliber bulls are used.

"I have stock suited for a range of rider skill levels," Darian says. "At rodeos, stock contractors are often in a hurry when you're getting on their animals, so I slow things down and let the riders take the time they need to get their gear right, and their minds right."

Walker got his own rodeo experience by competing in high school rodeo and in an amateur association for one year afterward. He says he enjoys passing on his skills to newcomers and hopes to grow the business by adding new attractions.

"We have plans next summer to put on some horse play days - which will involve barrel racing, pole bending, etc., for all ages. These events will offer high point prizes to help attract competitors. We'll also be host-



The Walkers hold "buckouts" in their 80-ft. outdoor riding arena and charge participants \$15 per ride.

ing some roping events," he says.

The Walkers were recently approached by a parent who wants to book the facility for a "bull-riding birthday party" for his five-year-old.

They'll be entertaining the young group of birthday party-goers with demonstrations by bull riders and give the kids a chance to have their photo taken with those fellows. They'll also get an opportunity to ride "a bucking barrel" (on springs for kids to get the feel of a bucking animal).

"We enjoy helping people get involved with rodeo, as it seems like a dying sport. Anything we can do to educate and encourage others to keep it going is rewarding," Darian says.

Creating the "rodeo school" has been a dream for the couple, who cleared trees from the hillside site and built a horse barn, the arena and holding pens. They hope to eventually put a roof over the arena for year-round use.

Since rodeo is a notoriously dangerous sport, the Walkers protect themselves by getting their clients to sign a "release of liability" form, drawn up by their lawyer. A notarized signature is required for minors without a parent present.

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