

## inPORTLAND

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### UPFRONT | BACKSTORY

## Let's drive tourists right into the river

By Spencer Heinz  
THE OREGONIAN

Any speculation that Portland is not a major-league town collapses now that duck-themed rides have arrived.

Certainly, the idea of a 10-ton amphibious craft in the name of waterfowl is not new. Land-and-water "duck" tours have been going on for years in other cities — Seattle, San Diego and Boston, to name a few. But until a few weeks ago, before Charles and Sarah Lewis of Northeast Portland took the plunge, this river city had no locomotive-sized, biodiesel-powered, duck-themed boat and bus.

Portland Ducks Land & Water Tours brings one here. It is feathered with duck clichés ("Put it on my bill") that do not need to be listed at length. Riders receive a plastic duck-call souvenir with a red lanyard. Then they motor through streets before driving into the Willamette River.

This amphibious life arose in the mind of Charles Lewis. Born 34 years ago in Missoula, Mont., Lewis grew up on his grandparents' farm with sugar beets and hay. Lewis worked his way through University of Portland, served in the Peace Corps, interned with then-Sen. Mark Hatfield and with the city, won a scholarship to Harvard and produced a master's thesis that led to his primary calling: Founding, in 1999, North Portland's Ethos Music Center, which provides instruments and music classes for families who otherwise could not manage such costs. He remains executive director.

During it all, he nurtured amphibious thoughts. He saw duck rides in Boston during Harvard days. He thought



Vicki Hernandez, 11, was one of more than 30 children and teens from North Portland's Bethel Neighborhood Drop-In Center who toured the Willamette River aboard Portland Duck Tours' amphibious bus.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL RUBINSTEIN/THE OREGONIAN



Portland was perfect for something like that. Three years ago he bought a 1967 Amphicar on eBay. As he first drove into the water, he asked himself what in the world was he doing. And when his car took on water, he wondered why so much.

"I didn't know it had drain plugs," he says.

Lewis continued his research. About 2 1/2 years ago, a mutual friend introduced him to Sarah Coakley, pastor of the Piedmont Presbyterian Church.

"I'm Presbyterian, too," he said, and when she asked where he went to church, his answer lacked specifics. She gave him a friendly scolding. Probably no more than a year went by before they started to seriously date. They married last November, and his amphibian dream became theirs.

They placed a second mortgage on their home, sold a few possessions and took out a small-business loan for a \$250,000 Hydra-Terra amphibious alu-

minum bus and boat, branded "unsinkable" because of its U.S. Coast-Guard-approved, foam-packed hull.

Ten months later, Lewis received a call that his order was ready. He took a red-eye to Buffalo, N.Y., in June, rode to the nearby Hydra-Terra factory of Cool Amphibious Manufacturers International, and spotted his purchase.

"I thought, 'That is HUGE. What have I done?'"

He had bought a 46-passenger amphibious bus about the height of an elephant and the length of a whale with a dashboard of labels that melded surf and turf: "Anchor Lights," "Bilge Pumps," "Rudder" and more.

He drove it home alone, drawing looks along the way.

Through an ad, the couple found Steven Emil, a former tug boat captain from Mississippi who had driven similar tour boats and who holds a commercial driver's license. Tours so far have brought along everyone from family and friends to a visiting

association of auditors. From Willamette Park, the bus splashed into the river.

"You're the best quackers I've ever met," tour guide Sarah said.

The idea is to continue in their primary vocations, the Lewises say, while giving others a feel for Portland's waterway. From this first for-profit venture, they plan to annually donate 5 percent to groups in need. A good thing, they add, is the chance to work together. They hammered out what to call their bus:

McCall's Mallard, after the late governor Tom McCall.

Any vessels to come, says Charles, could follow with salutes to Hatfield and others.

He stops for a moment, the smallest pause.

He cannot help himself.

"It's kind of getting your feet wet, getting your ducks in a row," he says, then looks away as though that came from somewhere else. ■

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