

# 'Hoverboards' hot for the holidays despite concerns

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Riding a "hoverboard" will zip you around town and make you the coolest person in the neighborhood. But it might also be risky.

These self-balancing electric scooters are surging in popularity in the first season where they have been available at relatively affordable prices—as low as \$300 for some models.

The trend is gaining traction despite multiple concerns: Some cities say they pose a hazard for street or sidewalk traffic, in addition to safety issues for riders; and some reports say poorly designed chargers can lead to fires or explosions.

Washington real estate investor Raphael Vargas, who uses his hoverboard daily, calls them "cool" and "a real conversation starter."

"It beats walking and it's a lot of fun," he said.

While his daily commute is too far for the scooter, Vargas said he brings it in his car and then rides from the parking lot to his workspace with it.

"I took it to the mall and it made shopping a breeze," he said.

To be sure, these are not the flying "hoverboard" from the film "Back to the Future" but rather two-wheeled electric scooters which are like a small, lightweight version of the Segway.

In recent years, technology has allowed the devices to be made lighter—as little as 25 pounds (11 kilos)—and to travel at speeds up to 12 miles (19 kilometers) per hour.

With self-balancing gyroscopes, similar to what is used in the Segway, the devices are designed to avert falls and allow riders to get comfortable in a matter of minutes, according to hoverboard marketers.

### **'So easy to use'**

"I got on and I learned in 10 minutes," said Tony Le, who saw his first hoverboards at a trade fair in China and decided to open his own retail operation in New Jersey under the brand Glitek.

Hoverboards are among the top items on wish lists for kids looking for a bit of adventure. But some also see a potential to fulfill the urban transportation role envisioned by the Segway, which failed, as consumers shunned the bulky, expensive devices.

"I think of this as revolutionary. It's so easy to use," Le said. "This is something that will be in the trunk of everyone's car."

Michael Tran, co-owner of the Ooverboard rental and sales outlet in Venice Beach, California, said the devices are catching on fast.

"Demand is very high and supply is low," he said.

An important feature, Tran said, is that they are intuitive to use.

"It acts like an extension of your leg. It's not like a vehicle," he said.

Juan Rodriguez, owner of Miami Hoverboard, said his beachside rental operation is full almost every day and that he is considering expanding to

nearby locations.

Rodriguez, whose firm also sells retail, said the hoverboard is a good urban transport option.

"It's small. You don't need parking. You can go to a restaurant, put it under the table and you're ready to go," he told AFP.

Hoverboards have gotten an added boost from celebrities ranging from Chris Brown to Justin Bieber, who is seen riding one in a YouTube video.

## **Are they 'vehicles'?**

But it's not all good news for hoverboard buffs. Australia's state of New South Wales banned them from roads, saying they are vehicles which cannot be licensed.

New York City has taken a similar position.

"Motorized self-balancing devices, such as Segways, hoverboards, and other 'personal transporters, are prohibited in New York City," the city's police department said in a statement.

State law "requires all motor vehicles to be registered... Since none of them may be registered they are not permitted."

Some college campuses have also banned hoverboards, including the University of California system.

There is also a risk of explosion or fire from charging systems. The US Consumer Product Safety Commission said it has received 11 reports of hoverboard fires in 10 states.

Online retailer Overstock said on December 9 it would stop selling hoverboards, and offered refunds to consumers who had already bought them, citing safety concerns.

British authorities seized 15,000 hoverboards this year, saying the charging systems could be hazardous.

The British branch of Amazon has also warned customers that some models of the device were unsafe because of "non-compliant" plugs—making them a potential fire hazard—and urging them to throw away defective boards.

Le said the safety issues reported so far have been linked to off-brand devices with substandard batteries and components, and that reputable brands have passed safety checks.

Patent disputes have also arisen over the technology used in the boards. Segway, which is now owned by a Chinese firm and produces its own version, filed suit against one rival, and US manufacturer Razor has sued another competitor.

Some argue the [hoverboard](#) is a wave that cannot be held back. Le, who talks frequently with manufacturers, says he believes at least one million hoverboards have been sold so far this year.

Razor, the manufacturer, says only that "this is going to be one of the hottest items of the season."

"More hoverboards will mean less cars, less pollution," said Miami's Rodriguez. "We can't resist the future. We have to adapt."

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