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The Green Tortoise picks up several waiting passengers Sunday in front of PLC. The "alternative transportation" is available from this location eight times a week. Photo by Jeff Paslay

Take in the sights with a tortoise

□ "Alternative transportation" offers option of seeing more for less.

By Laura Ennis
Emerald Contributor

Painted in three shades of reptile green, the former Seattle transit bus eases around the corner and stops eight times a week behind PLC on Kincaid Street.

Resembling more a dusty remnant of the 1960s than the psychedelic magic bus it recollects, the Green Tortoise opens its doors to the young and old.

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Some passengers are middle-aged hippies with barefoot kids. But most are in their 20s. Some people come to take advantage of the cheap fares and carry on a book to block out the swaying bus and its passengers.

The first time I rode the Tortoise, I felt a bit rebellious for taking "alternative transportation." And I enjoyed the curious, sometimes suspicious, looks of the diners at the Albany truck stop, where we stopped to fill up.

But to my surprise, the Tortoise is unusually laid back and has less of the rowdy, eccentric behavior I prepared myself for.

"No obnoxious behavior is allowed on the bus," said Eric Gerrick, general manager of Green Tortoise World Headquarters in San Francisco. "Whether it's induced by alcohol or upbringing."

Away from the bus, passengers can do whatever they want, smoke or drink. But once on the bus, they face a shortened trip — they'll be thrown off if they bother the other passengers.

Riders sprawl out on soft benches at RV-style tables to sing, talk, play cards, and listen to music. (Green Tortoise is the only bus line in the world that screens driver applicants for their music taste as well as their driving skills, according to a *New York Times* feature on the Tortoise.)

The cost is less than Greyhound (\$10 cheaper

to San Francisco), and the ride is much different.

"We try to solve everything people hate about the bus," Gerrick said.

This means, whether going up or down the West Coast or across the country, the Tortoise stops during the day for passenger-cooked meals (no greasy diners), hiking and camping excursions and swimming breaks (skinny dipping is allowed, if not expected). The idea is to see the sights during the day and sleep at night when the bus covers the most miles.

"It's like life," said passenger Gonzales of the Bay Area. "The passengers laugh and talk to each other."

The Tortoise also travels around the country during the summer months — going to Baja, New Orleans and the East Coast. These five-to-14-day excursions with their slumber party atmospheres have also captured the interest of the white collar world.

The Wall Street Journal, *The New York Times* and *New Yorker* magazine have all featured the Green Tortoise. But while the articles praise the "hair-raising trip," as described by *The New York Times* travel writer, few readers will travel the Tortoise.

"They like to read about us," said Gerrick. "They gawk and think it's interesting. But they never ride."

Other unlikely passengers who show interest in the Tortoise are retired people from Florida.

"They hear about our cheap fares," said Gerrick. "And while they're welcome to come, I don't think the Tortoise is what they're looking for. So I tell them there's no bathroom and ask them to bring their sleeping bags. That usually kills their interest."

While not always ideal — it's hard to get a full night's sleep on the road and one's adaptability to group living must be high — the Tortoise offers an alternative, inexpensive vacation.

"It's like a family vacation with easygoing parents," Gonzales said. "We can dance and sing and they stop for you to go to the bathroom."

Reservations for the Green Tortoise can be made by calling 937-3603.

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