



Feature: Touring Motor

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Wine tours are becoming more and more popular, as well as more accessible.

by [Erin Thomas](#)



Roger Stockdale stepped out of the driver's seat of a Lincoln Town Car Stretch, blasting a song he probably would never have chosen to listen to again, and smiled. He gazed up to see a group of young women, 80% blonde and 100% unwed, bombing down a hill paralleling the grandeur of Lake Chelan. After receiving hugs from each sundress-clad woman and posing as an amateur photographer with ten different cameras, Stockdale shuttled his ladies inside his car, his smile never fading.

All in a day's work for Stockdale as a professional chauffeur and wine aficionado for Lakeside Limousine in Chelan.

"All of our drivers provide a wine tour experience as they are not just a driver," said Ron Kehl, the Chelan company's owner. "Our drivers understand the area, the winemaking process, the different wineries and tasting rooms, the respective estate wines, the history of the area as well as all the hidden jewels along the way."

Kehl, who also manages Lake Chelan Shores Resort, said tourism has always been a major attraction to the area, especially now with the growing wine industry, which is nearing on AVA status with its current fourteen wineries.

With three years in the bag, Lakeside Limousine advocates for a "Nordstrom experience with a Wal-Mart price," offering a service created specifically for the wine tour industry as half-day excursions ranging from \$59 per person to \$150.

Hardly sixty miles down the road, Leavenworth whistles a similar tune with Le Tours, the city's "Enchanted Tours."

"We're a wine tour company, not a limo company," said John Burpbe, co-owner of the Bavarian town's feature service. "We're not a transportation company, and we're part of the experience the whole time."

To make Le Tours' promise their policy, the wine tour service has built relationships with surrounding wineries, restaurants, spas, river raft trips and even a horse-drawn sleigh and carriage company that all compile into their full-blown experience packaged deals.

"We've had a lot of interest, but we're not where we want to be yet," Burpbe said of his nearly year-old company. Le Tours is attempting to promote the winter wine tour season, including Oktoberfest and Christmas-related packages, pricing at \$55 to \$135.

MKF Research reported that U.S. wineries attracted 27.3 million visitors in 2007. The wine-tourism industry in the States is thriving based off the sales brought in by the direct purchases from nearly 5,000 bonded wineries, instead of distributors, according to the MKF report.

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According to a report released early this year by the Association of Wine Grape Growers, "wine-related tourism expenditures increased 1,157 percent over 1999 reaching \$237.6 million for 2006, a 165.3 percent increase per year. The number of wine-related tourists in Washington increased from 350,000 in 1999 to 1.7 million in 2006."

According to the Washington Wine Commission, as the second largest premium wine producer, Washington wine attracts around two million tourists annually. WWC reports wine tourism is helping to give a positive contribution to local, regional and even national economies.

Wine tourism, a trend in its own sense of nontraditional economy pushing, comes in all shapes and sizes as well.

Jason Klinke is a software design engineer for Expedia, frequents a local beer and wine specialty shop, and has recently refurbished part of his home into a theater. But annually in July, Klinke puts on his helmet and prepares for the self-assembled Redmond-to-Woodinville biking wine tour of "Roller Slosh."

The term was bagged after a wine tasting outing Klinke and his cousin had on rollerblades. "After a few glasses of wine, we felt like it was a bit of a slosh to get back home, and the term just rolled off the tongue," Klinke said.

The fourth annual Roller Slosh had numbers racking up to thirty-odd neon orange-shirted bike riders, with a few drivers to make sure the sloshing stayed manageable and supported.

"We're a 'fun'-raiser," Klinke said. "We're just out to all have a good wine-tasting experience, a good time in the summer and meet good people."

Klinke soon hopes to pick up sponsorship and make the event an actual fundraiser.

Alongside other conventional wine tours, Woodinville also offers another tour, literally off the beaten path. Evergreen Escapes is a wine trail that provides lush nature and cultural experiences in the greater Seattle area.

"The focus is on the natural history of the area," said Jake Hauptert, Evergreen Escapes founder. "It's not just about the wine, but about the climate and the soil in this area. We try to combine that with the winemaker's vision."

Hauptert's tours have been establishing a bond with sustainable Woodinville wineries including JM Cellars, owner of the largest cherry tree in North America, and Hollywood Hill vineyards, the only vineyard in Woodinville.

"Our guests go in and have a tasting as well as a tour, and our guides take them around the property for a nature walk," Hauptert said. "We're the only tour operation that has this relationship with the little cellars that aren't open to the public."

Back in Chelan, Kehl said Lakeside Limousine's winery relations are crucial as he sees wine tourism companies as partners with the wine industry. "We want to provide a service that is good for our customers and for the wineries themselves," Kehl said.

Going hand in hand with the ever-exploding wine industry in Washington State, wine tourism is shooting through the roof with decent prices for double the experience.

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