

Autonomous Cars Are Coming For You

If you've never sat in a car without a steering wheel, you're in for a treat.

See something up ahead that you need to steer around? Can't. Need to brake? Relax, the computer will do it.

This is just the situation I encountered in Taipei, site of the annual Taipei AMPA, AutoTronics Taipei, Taiwan International Intelligent Transportation Show, Taiwan International Motorcycle Industry Show and Taiwan International Car Tuning & Car Care Show, held in early April.

I'll be the first to say I'm an autonomous-car proponent. I tell everyone I know, "It's coming. Robot cars are coming. Get used to it!"

Almost everyone I tell about autonomous cars says the same thing: It ain't for me. No way. No! I won't do it. "Why?", I ask. Is driving so absolutely pleasurable these days, evokes such passion and fire within you, that deprived of it you can hardly imagine what life will be like? I don't think so. But it's one thing to tell friends and family about the impending onslaught of completely autonomous vehicles. It's another thing to experience a fully autonomous vehicle.

So there I am in Taipei in the passenger's seat, the one I don't like because I clearly have control issues. And the petite vehicle that researchers have outfitted with autonomous-driving gear (and minus the steering wheel, which they tore out!), begins gliding gently forward soon after

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I get in and belt up. So far, so good. We haven't hit anything. Until the researchers coax someone to walk in front of the vehicle.

"Oh, please, let the camera or radar on this thing see the guy and stop," I hope silently. "Tell me I'm not going to be involved in a terrible accident in Taipei." As the guy crosses in front of the vehicle's path, it comes to a stop. He finishes jay-walking in front of the vehicle and our car begins moving again. Our little car takes us to the end of our journey and drops us off to yet another autonomous vehicle – this time, steering wheel included. The first car just took us down a closed test area. Now, the real fun begins. We're taking the other, larger car out onto the streets of Taipei for a real-world test. The motorists around us probably don't realize our car is driven by a system of computers and sensors. The car stops at a red light – because it "sees" there's a red light up ahead. It turns this way and that way. (Watching a steering wheel turn by itself is kind of amazing.) It stops in traffic. It starts back up again. We are navigating our way through the streets of a city with millions of people. And guess what? It was fine.

I'm happy to report to my family, friends, colleagues and anyone else who will listen to me drone on and on about robot cars that fully autonomous driving is a real thing. It's safe. It's comfortable. (The car takes into consideration there are people inside it and doesn't inflict nasty G-forces on its occupants.) **CM**