

Amsterdam to pilot world's first 'self-drive' boats

September 20 2016



The first prototypes of the "Roboat" will launch next year, according to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions

Amsterdam's iconic canals may soon see the world's first driverless boats, doing everything from moving people and goods to providing "pop-up" bridges and cleaning up thousands of dumped bicycles, the project's scientists said.

The first prototypes of the so-called "Roboat" will launch next year, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Metropolitan Solutions (AMS) said.

MIT has donated 20 million euros (\$22.3 million) to the research.

"While the first prototypes of self-driving cars are taking to the road, Amsterdam ushers in a new chapter in the international push for autonomous vehicles," the AMS said in a statement earlier this week.

"Imagine a fleet of autonomous boats for the transportation of goods and people," added MIT professor Carlo Ratti, who heads the Roboat research programme.

The boats could also stack together to form bridges across the canals, for instance to alleviate crowding during busy events.

"Roboat offers enormous possibilities," said AMS scientific director Arjan van Timmeren, adding that the boats could also be used to help carry out "further research on underwater robots that can detect (water-borne) diseases at an early stage".

"Or we can use Roboats to rid the canals from floating waste and find a more efficient way to handle the 12,000 bicycles that end up in there every year," Van Timmeren said.



Canal cruises form the largest tourist attraction in Amsterdam that sees some 17 million visitors flocking there every year, while some 2,500 houseboats are also moored along Amsterdam's canals and rivers

With some 165 canals, totalling a length of 50 kilometres (31 miles) according to the Dutch capital's marketing office, Amsterdam is the "ideal place for developing Roboat", researchers said.

Declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2010, the 400-year-old canal ring around Amsterdam has always been a transport and recreational mainstay in the city, sometimes called the "Venice of the North".

Today, canal cruises form the largest tourist attraction in the city that sees some 17 million visitors flocking there every year, while some 2,500 houseboats are also moored along Amsterdam's canals and rivers.

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Citation: Amsterdam to pilot world's first 'self-drive' boats (2016, September 20) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-09-amsterdam-world-self-drive-boats.html>

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