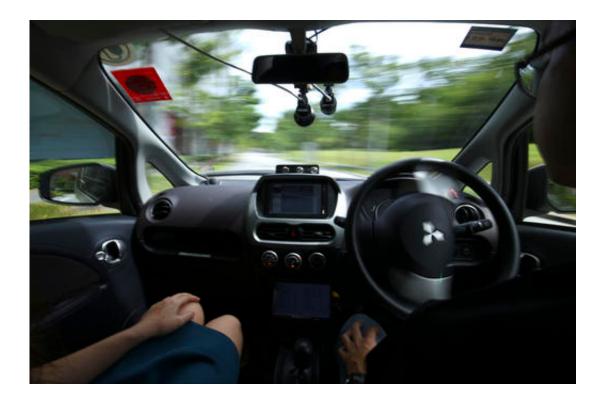# No longer invite-only, 'robo-cars' offered to Singaporeans

September 23 2016, by Annabelle Liang

In this file photo from Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016, a driver, right, gets his hands off of the steering wheel of an autonomous vehicle during its test drive in Singapore. Autonomous vehicle software startup nuTonomy has made rides on its self-driving taxis available to the general public in Singapore for free, expanding a first-in-the world run that was initially invitation-only. (AP Photo/Yong Teck Lim, File)

Autonomous vehicle software startup nuTonomy has made rides on its

self-driving taxis available to the general public in Singapore for free, expanding a first-in-the world run that was initially invitation-only.

While multiple companies, including Google and Volvo, have been testing self-driving cars on public roads for several years, nuTonomy announced in August that was the first to offer autonomous taxi rides. It beat Uber, which started offering rides in autonomous cars in Pittsburgh last week.

The Singapore trial was limited to a 2.5-square-mile (6.5-square-kilometer) business and residential district called "one north." NuTonomy CEO Karl Iagnemma said Friday that the test area has since been doubled by the government. The approved route does not include any highways.

NuTonomy, a spinoff from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, announced Friday that the public can now book self-driving taxis through an app by Grab, the biggest ride-hailing company in Southeast Asia. The two companies announced a year-long partnership.

To book a ride, passengers will have to select the 'robo-car' option on Grab's app, which has been downloaded more than 20 million times. Passengers have to be older than 18, book in advance and sign a liability waiver. Rides will be free for at least two months.

In this Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016, file photo, an autonomous vehicle is parked for its test drive in Singapore. Autonomous vehicle software startup nuTonomy has made rides on its self-driving taxis available to the general public in Singapore for free, expanding a first-in-the world run that was initially invitation-only. (AP Photo/Yong Teck Lim, File)

"We will be combining nuTonomy's self-driving car software with Grab's app, with their proven fleet routing technology and their mapping capabilities," said nuTonomy CEO Karl Iagnemma.

The cars—modified Renault Zoe and Mitsubishi i-MiEV electrics—have a safety driver in front who is prepared to take the wheel and a researcher in back who watches the car's computers.

If a pick-up or drop-off point is out of approved testing perimeters, the driver will take over for the rest of the journey, Iagnemma said.

"It's an evolution to identify where are the easy parts, where are the trickier parts where we need to spend more time," he said.

In this file photo from Wednesday, Aug. 24, 2016, an autonomous vehicle is driven during its test drive in Singapore. Autonomous vehicle software startup nuTonomy has made rides on its self-driving taxis available to the general public in Singapore for free, expanding a first-in-the world run that was initially invitation-only. (AP Photo/Yong Teck Lim, File)

Iagnemma would not say how many rides nuTonomy provided in the trial period but said thousands signed up for the invited trial within the first 48 hours. The company said there have been no problems.

The company expects its six-car fleet to grow to a dozen by the end of the year. It plans to make its Singapore taxi fleet fully self-driving by 2018.

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