

'Car nation' Germany distrustful of driverless vehicles

September 19 2017, by Jean-Philippe Lacour



Visitors to the IAA can be taken for a spin in driverless cars

German carmakers are showing off their self-driving cars at the IAA international auto show in Frankfurt, but most people in the car-mad country have yet to be convinced by the technology.

Curious visitors to the biennial trade fair, which lasts until September 24, can entrust their lives to a computer on a specially created car at a

test track overlooked by Daimler and Volkswagen's giant stands.

An expert is behind the wheel, if not grasping it firmly, to demonstrate how a car studded with sensors and cameras can perform an emergency stop, react to a sudden lane change or park itself—even while hauling a horse trailer.

"This is crazy!" one passenger laughed as their vehicle raced towards an obstacle at 50 kilometres per hour (30 mph) before braking sharply without the driver touching the controls.

Rival carmakers and parts suppliers—Daimler, Volkswagen, Audi, Bosch, Continental and ZF—came together for the scheme, part of a broader push for acceptance as high-tech US firms like Google and Tesla appear to be streaking ahead.

At present, just 26 percent of Germans say they would ride in an autonomous car, while even fewer—18 percent—would own one, a recent survey from consultancy firm Ernst & Young found.

OK Computer?

"The braking was great fun," Lena Dickeduisberg, a student, said after stepping out of the demonstration car, her hair slightly tousled from the ride.

Beyond the thrill of the test track, cars will need to perform such manoeuvres reliably in all kinds of situations if carmakers are ever to attain the highest level of autonomy, known as "level five"—meaning a car that can do without a driver altogether.

"It will take time, but it's the future," Dickeduisberg smiled confidently. "I believe in the technology."

"What a dream it would be, a car that takes me from A to B while I read the paper or my clients' documents. But maybe I'm just saying that because of my age," said salesman Randolph Mayer, 61.

The two are far from typical among the German public, long wedded to the idea that driving should be pleasurable.

Volkswagen adverts in the 1990s introduced the United States to its self-minted German portmanteau "Fahrvergnuegen"—or "driving enjoyment".

"Driving isn't just functional, it's got to be enjoyable," said Georg Pfennig, an Austrian attendee.

Automation "makes sense for young people or for the elderly who might have trouble with some manoeuvres", he grudgingly allowed.

Self-driving cars "could drive as a convoy on motorways where everything is automated, but not to go shopping in town", judged Lars Heider, an engineering student.

"Unless everyone is using one, but then you have to be able to afford a self-driving car," he added.

Money machine

The auto industry is all too aware of the cost of automation, which remains "very high", said Patrick Koller, chief executive of parts supplier Faurecia.

Joint investments in research and development have become the rule in the field, such as the German carmaker BMW's alliance with US-based chipmaker Intel, Israeli smart-camera firm Mobileye and Italian-

American FiatChrysler.

Elsewhere, the Mercedes-Benz maker Daimler has joined forces with the parts supplier Bosch, while Volkswagen is drawing on its luxury subsidiary Audi.

And Audi, BMW and Daimler pooled their cash to buy Here, a company specialising in the hyper-detailed maps that are vital for autonomous driving.

But ordinary drivers must be convinced that autonomous driving is safe before their reticence can be overcome, according to the Centre of Automotive Management (CAM), a research institute near Cologne in western Germany.

Self-driving cars "will save lives", Rolf Bulander, the head of Bosch's mobility division, told AFP, adding that he believed "people will get used" to the increasing power and adaptability of driving-assistance systems.

Enormous sums are at stake for companies like Bosch, which expects revenue from such systems to double by 2019, reaching 2 billion euros (\$2.4 billion).

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Citation: 'Car nation' Germany distrustful of driverless vehicles (2017, September 19) retrieved 18 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2017-09-car-nation-germany-distrustful-driverless.html>

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