NEWS

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Google's high-rollers gamble on driverless cars in Vegas

Sin City is about to get even naughtier. Google is lobbying to have self-driving robot cars legalised in Las Vegas, leaving drivers free to text at the wheel, gamble online or even drink and "drive".

The secret project, codenamed Chauffeur, has been in development for the past 18 months. However, details of the technology giant's plans have emerged with the publication of two bills being considered by Nevada's state assembly.

One seeks to open the way for robot cars and taxis to cruise Las Vegas's famous Strip. The other will exempt drivers of autonomous cars from a new law banning texting at the wheel.

Although the idea of self-driving cars has been around for years, this is the first time that the proposal has been held up to real-world scrutiny. If the law is changed in Nevada, it could pave the way for more widespread acceptance of self-driving cars around the world.

The biggest obstacle is the question of who is legally responsible for the vehicle should it be involved in an accident. Google has proposed that the new law would allow drivers to hand over legal responsibility to self-driving vehicles, even to the point of being held blameless if the car should crash while they were talking or texting on a mobile.

One of the bills states that "a person shall be deemed not to be operating a motor vehicle if the motor vehicle is driven autonomously".

If this were to be accepted, it would be the biggest change in motoring law history — essentially divorcing the "driver" of the vehicle from legal responsibility for it.

One of Google's main arguments in favour of autonomous vehicles is that computerised cars, immune to aggression, distraction and road rage, will actually save lives.

"We believe our technology has the potential to cut road deaths, perhaps by as much as half," said Sebastian Thrun, the Google researcher in charge of the Chauffeur project.

Google currently has eight autonomous vehicles in its fleet — seven Toyota Priuses and one Audi TT. They work by using a rapidly spinning 3-D laser scanner on the roof, backed up by radar units, motion detectors, video cameras and GPS satellite navigation to build up a picture of the road ahead.

An onboard computer then electronically controls the car's acceleration, braking and steering systems.

Google has a robot car fleet of seven Toyota Priuses and one Audi TT

Motorists in Vegas could watch roadside attractions instead of the road in a computerised car

Getty

In more than 140,000 miles of test drives, Google's cars have had only a single accident — when a robotic Prius was rear-ended at a traffic light by a human driver.

General Motors, which is working on similar technology, claims the idea is still years away from practical application.

"I don't think we're ready yet to introduce autonomous vehicles in an uncontrolled environment such as a regular city or even a motorway," said Chris Borroni-Bird, director of advanced technology vehicle concepts at GM. "It's really a vision of what might be possible in 2030."

However, Google is not prepared to wait that long. Thrun believes that the company's technology will be found in new cars within just eight years, and Chauffeur robo-cars have already been spotted cruising the Las Vegas Strip as part of a trial run.

Mark Harris

I'm afraid I have to charge you: police unleash electric patrol car

Softly, softly: here come the electric police. Thames Valley is to become the first force in Britain to start patrolling in a whisper-quiet, battery-powered car that, in order to preserve charge, will not feature either a siren or a blue flashing light.

The Mitsubishi i-Miev, complete with police livery, will be on the streets of Milton Keynes from next month. Other forces have tested electric cars but this is believed to be the first to be bought. It will be used to police neighbourhoods and city centre streets rather than as a high-speed response car.

Thames Valley describes it as a landmark event for police fleets and says that the car's small size makes it perfect for urban patrols. It has a range of only 93 miles but will not be required to travel further than about 50 miles a day. If an officer finds that his i-Miev has run flat while on the beat, the vehicle can be recharged to 80% in just 30 minutes from a regular domestic 240V supply.

However, its performance may give some hope to cycle-riding hoodies. The i-Miev takes a full 13 seconds to reach 62mph. "This is not a high-speed response vehicle; it is a patrol vehicle," says David McDonald, the fleet manager of Chiltern Transport Consortium, which provides cars for several forces, including Thames Valley, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire.

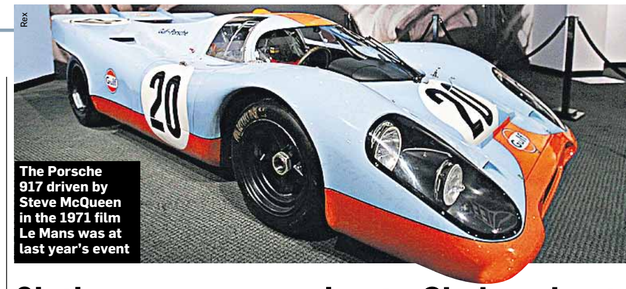
Thames Valley's i-Miev will have no siren or flashing light

In that patrol role, the i-Miev has its benefits. "We believe this [car] is not only necessary to protect future generations from the worst effects of global warming," says McDonald, "but also to protect the public purse from the inevitable and relentless rise in fuel prices in the coming years."

The purchase price is barely less than that of a conventional patrol car, however. The i-Miev cost the force £23,990, and that's after deducting the £5,000 government grant available to buyers of new electric cars. McDonald calculates that it will break even within six to eight years, through savings on fuel costs. It will be recharged overnight from a standard plug at the local police station.

Other forces, including Hampshire and Central Scotland, are understood to be considering adding electric cars to their fleets within the next few months.

Joseph Dunn



Rex

The Porsche 917 driven by Steve McQueen in the 1971 film Le Mans was at last year's event

Sixties supercars swing to Chelsea beat

Mini Coopers and miniskirts will be the order of the day at this year's Chelsea AutoLegends event in London.

A parade of exotic cars will weave its way through the capital to the show, which promises fans a trip down memory lane with some of the stars of the 1960s alongside up-to-date supercars.

As well as classic racing and road cars, the Bugatti Veyron Super Sport, Ferrari 599 GTO and McLaren MP4-12C will be there.

The theme is the Swinging Sixties, inspired by the 50th birthdays of the Mini Cooper and Jaguar E-type. Look out for the classic Ford GT40 and the blue Ferrari 250 GT SWB that sped Stirling Moss to victory in the 1961 Tourist Trophy at Goodwood.

Organisers are also searching for visitors with unusual cars to display at the event, to be held on September 4 at the Royal Hospital Chelsea. Such entries last year included a Volkswagen camper van, Austin Healeys, Triumphs and Sunbeams.

Visitors will be encouraged to dig out their kaftans, miniskirts and bell-bottoms to bring the Sixties theme to life.

With 500 cars and about 15,000 visitors, the show, which is supported by The Sunday Times, promises a unique atmosphere where racing drivers and celebrity petrolheads mix with fans. Last year they included rock stars such as Jay Kay, of Jamiroquai, and Pink Floyd's Nick Mason. A string of Le Mans racing drivers also attended, including Derek Bell, who won five times, and Moss.

"The great thing about the show is that it's not just racing cars," said Moss. "It's an amazing automotive festival with something for everyone."

Tickets for the motoring spectacular are on sale at chelseaautolegends.com. Advance prices are £15 for adults and £10 for ages 12-16. Children under 12 get in free.

Organisers have just one difficulty: plotting a supercar route that avoids London's ruinous speed bumps.

Dominic Tobin

Traffic lights to put the brakes on speeding

Drivers who speed will be punished by being forced to wait at traffic lights under a pilot scheme that could be adopted across the country.

Swindon will be the first place in Britain to implement the system, which uses sensors in the road to monitor motorists' speed. If a car is breaking the speed limit, the next set of traffic lights are instructed to turn red, bringing the speeding car, and the vehicles behind it, to a halt.

Equipment will be installed this autumn in one road where more than two-thirds of cars are estimated to speed, and in another where more than a third of vehicles are said to break the limit. The sensors will control traffic lights already installed at junctions.

Numberplate recognition cameras will ensure emergency vehicles are given a green light.

"I have been talking about this with my team for about two years," said Peter Greenhalgh, Swindon council's cabinet member responsible for planning and transport. "I have seen it in Spain and France and it seems to work really well, and [I] couldn't see why we were not doing it in the UK. It is an intelligent way of managing traffic flows and ensuring that cars drive in a safe manner."

He added: "The whole key is to monitor driver behaviour without beating them over the head. It may annoy them, but I think eventually people will work out that if they maintain a constant speed at or around the speed limit then actually their journey times will be much shorter because they won't be getting delayed by traffic lights."

In 2009 Swindon became the first council in Britain to switch off its speed cameras, saying the money could be better spent on other safety measures. Since then the Conservative-controlled council has been working on an alternative that tackles speeding without hitting drivers' pockets.

If the scheme is a success, the council said it could be extended to all Swindon's 200 junctions with traffic lights. The Department for Transport said it would monitor the trial.

Dominic Tobin

If a standard supercar is too common, Ferrari's special projects division can help. It builds one-off creations for people so wealthy that an off-the-shelf car is vulgar. The Superamerica 45, right, is a 599 GTO restyled with carbon fibre and a new interior. Peter Kalikow, an American property tycoon, commissioned the multi-million-pound car — and took away the tooling to ensure it remained unique.

LETTERS

Tax brake

Re "Come to Venezuela: fuel is 1.4p a litre" (News, last week), at least David Cameron can claim that Britain is in one top decile of the world, if only in the extent of fuel taxes. These may give the government a warm green glow, but they impact on the spending power of consumers and create a double whammy by feeding directly into food costs, which, according to the governor of the Bank of England, are the most savage economic deflator.

Fuel taxes also feed directly into reducing other government revenues as economic activity stalls and unemployment increases. Lowering fuel taxation might well reduce the state's income, but more jobs and increased financial growth could make up that loss surprisingly quickly.

Mary Dendy, Great Warford, Cheshire

Oil slump

I had to smile last week when I read the quote "unsurprisingly, the cheapest petrol is in oil-producing countries". I have always thought Britain was an oil-producing country. Perhaps not.

Jeff Elliott, Catterick Garrison, North Yorkshire

Diesel's hidden promise

With reference to last week's article "Shocking cost of the electric dream", battery-powered cars are neither green, nor efficient, because of their reliance on fossil fuel generation, which is usually less thermally efficient than the modern car engine.

Electric motors are, however, efficient users of energy and have the great advantage of having only a single moving part. The problem is supplying the energy: today's batteries still have similar range and charging impediments to those of the first battery-driven vehicles.

A small diesel generator and back-up battery offer the advantages of electric power with the range and existing infrastructure benefits of the conventional car. Diesel electric buses are running in Manchester, and the diesel electric train has been the mainstay of the world's railways for 80 years, so the technology is already highly developed.

A sane government would be investing in this world-beating technology rather than encouraging people to purchase battery cars on a false prospectus larded with transient tax advantages.

Dr Ranseed Bhutta, Coventry

Missing motorbikes

I have just opened my Sunday papers and delved straight into InGear (as is my wont) but once again have been disappointed to find the motorcycling article missing for the umpteenth time.

Whatever has happened to this excellent column by Geoff Hill, whose (once regular) informative and interesting articles I enjoyed reading almost as much as those by Mr Clarkson?

Thanks for the rest of InGear, though, which continues in its usual eclectic style; I bought the Vita Audio DAB music system solely on your recommendation (as best sound) and am still amazed by its sound and versatility.

Tim Milton, via email

Editor's note: Geoff will return

Light speed

Peter Rust writes ("Lighting the way", Letters, last week) that synchronised traffic lights have worked to slow speeders. This is only partially true, as the lights he mentions in Slough were "beatable" by travelling at 60mph — or twice the speed limit. Or so I am informed.

David Lewis, Brent, London

Data sale

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) relies on the Road Vehicles (Registration and Licensing) Regulations' infamous regulation 27 — a statutory instrument — as the legal basis for selling personal data to anyone with a "reasonable cause" ("The stealth wardens out to fine you £150", News, May 8). The problem is that it is the DVLA that decides what is reasonable.

The DVLA claims on its website that each request for personal data is checked "carefully". In fact, most are not checked at all because the data are taken automatically via an electronic link. The DVLA also claims that it has a legal duty to disclose personal data. This is not true. The regulation says that the DVLA "may" disclose data rather than "must".

The DVLA says that if it does not disclose the personal data, it can be taken to court, but that is precisely what should happen, so the courts can decide what is reasonable, not the DVLA acting as judge and jury.

We are also in discussion with the European commission about the compatibility of regulation 27 with European directives. We think that it is not compatible and therefore not lawful.

Paul Morris, The Data Protection Society, Manchester

Lack of protection

With regard to the editor's note to your correspondent Eric Tomlin, which explains that motorists cannot stop their details being sold by the DVLA ("Too much information", Letters, last week). Does this mean, therefore, that the DVLA is exempt from the Data Protection Act?

Chris Puttick, Cranham, Essex

Bright lights

Cars with xenon headlights ("Fight to end menace of dazzling xenon headlights", News, May 8) may be getting through the MoT test but they nonetheless are in contravention of the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations, which prohibit "headlamps used so as to cause undue dazzle or discomfort to other persons using the road".

This can only be a subjective test, and I for one would happily give evidence that they cause me much discomfort when facing them. I find it astonishing that the Department for Transport would give type approval to such a retrograde step in road safety — if indeed they have ever been submitted for approval.

Allan Makinson, Burnley

Low opinion

The reply to the query about the merits/demerits of low-profile tyres (Car Clinic, last week) made no mention of how they make tyres and wheels far more susceptible to damage, both minor (scraped alloys) and major (destroyed tyres) from kerbs and potholes.

With 19in wheels on my Jaguar XF, I "wrote off" two barely worn tyres when on each occasion the rim sliced a 4in lump out of the surface of the side wall. In neither case did the tyres deflate but they had to be replaced at £190 each time.

Dr John Myatt, Denchworth, Oxfordshire

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