

Ford launches 'hands-free' driving on UK motorways

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The self-drive option is now available on 6,000 kilometres (3,700 miles) of UK 'blue zones' motorways.

In a scene Ford hopes to see across Europe "soon", the first hands-free car model allowed on the UK's fastest roads zoomed down a motorway

before slowing down as the back of a truck appeared.

Traveling at 60 miles per hour (100 kilometers per hour), the small SUV remained within its lane as an AFP journalist took a ride in the driver's seat along the M11 motorway north of London.

Ford activated the "BlueCruise" self-drive option on its electric flagship, the Mustang Mach-E, in the UK in April.

After debuting in the United States in 2021, the option is now available on 6,000 kilometers (3,700 miles) of UK "blue zones" motorways—equipped with four lanes and central dividers—from Dover to Scotland.

While the driver's hands are free, the car ensures that there is no fiddling with phones—and that eyes are fixed on the road—thanks to several cameras and infrared sensors.

The on-board computer offers to take over driving duties when it enters the motorway, but when it detects that the driver has looked away for 10 seconds, a voice says, "Look at the road. Resume control".

If the warning is not heeded, the car will slam on the brakes and sound warnings.

Some 500 [early adopters](#) have joined the trial in Britain, paying £17.99 (21 euros) per month.

In North America, the option is also available on the F-150 pickup truck and the Expedition SUV.

Ford claims that 200,000 drivers use it, with no accidents.

Competitor General Motors also offers hands-free driving, as does Mercedes on the German autobahn, but only in traffic jams with a maximum speed of 60 kmh imposed.

'Lighten the load'

Tesla boss Elon Musk has long predicted that fully autonomous driving (Level 4) is just around the corner.

Ford, for its part, is betting on immediate applications of the technology but last year ended a research partnership on autonomous driving with startup Argo AI.

"We're optimistic about a future for L4 ADAS, but profitable, fully [autonomous vehicles](#) at scale are a long way off and we won't necessarily have to create that technology ourselves," Ford CEO Jim Farley said late last year.

"But things have changed, and there's a huge opportunity right now for Ford to give time -- the most valuable commodity in [modern life](#) -- back to millions of customers while they're in their vehicles," he added.

The US brand was the first in the UK to benefit from an exemption allowing hands-free driving, said Douwe Cunningham, in charge of safety certification at Ford's European operation.

He is currently in discussions with the British authorities about the next step—enabling the car to change lanes to overtake when the indicator is activated.

But the hands-free option doesn't mean the driver will be able to type on their phone or read a book.

"It's evolution, not revolution," admitted Cunningham.

He believes that improved [cruise control](#) is the next step towards Level 3 autonomous driving, which will allow the computer to take over the driving in the majority of situations.

Tariq Willis, marketing expert for the American brand, told AFP that BlueCruise gives drivers "an opportunity to take a little bit of the load off them, especially in traffic", letting the car "do the hard work".

BlueCruise should be available "soon" in Germany, then in France, said Cunningham.

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