

Forget flying carpets, flying taxis are coming your way

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Experts expect flying taxis, a model of which is pictured here, to take to the skies by 2025

We've all dreamed while stuck in traffic jams of being able to just lift off and fly over the gridlock.

According to experts gathered this week at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, that is likely to happen sooner than later, with flying taxis expected to take to the skies by 2025.

"People have been dreaming about it for decades on paper, and now the technology is here," said Michael Thacker, executive vice-president for technology and innovation at Bell. "The only question is, what are we going to do with it?"

Thacker said his company has joined with ride-hailing app Uber and several aeronautics firms, including France's Safran, to create a fleet of flying taxis that are called vertical take-off and landing vehicles (VTOL).

The Nexus, as this hybrid electric propulsion aircraft is named, was first unveiled in January at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

Between 20 and 30 other firms are working on similar concepts, among them start-ups or major companies such as Airbus, which recently presented its electric aircraft CityAirbus.

Uber plans to launch its air taxis first in Los Angeles and Dallas, two major traffic-congested American cities.

Asked about using helicopters as an alternative, Thacker said the taxis are financially sounder and quieter.

"The noise has to blend in with the background noise of the city," he said.

He predicted the vehicles could start to be commercially used around 2025.

"It's not going to replace ground transport, it will augment it in another dimension," he said. "And it's not going to jump overnight with thousands of aircraft.

"There will rather be a few dozens of them in a few cities... at first using helipads and helicopter routes."

Bell executives said drones transporting goods, such as emergency medical products, should take to the skies well before taxis given lesser restrictions imposed on such aircraft.

"Transport of goods don't have so many requirements in terms of safety and acceptability by people," he said.



One of the biggest technological hurdles for flying car concepts to overcome is the battery: most of the prototypes designed use electric propulsion and batteries currently don't have enough power to fly a car for a long distance

Jaiwon Shin, associate administrator for the Aeronautics Research Mission Directorate at NASA, said although 2025 appears like a reasonable date for a limited launch of flying vehicles, it will take longer for the market to fully expand.

"For this market to really flourish... I think we really need to mature the market at scale and that may take a decade," he said.

Also, experts say, several barriers still need to be overcome before flying vehicles get the green light.

A third dimension

You have to see "if you can actually test the vehicle in an urban space without having visual line of sight over people with buildings," said Shivika Sahdev, with the consulting firm McKinsey.

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Still, industry experts are optimistic about the new technology.

In a report entitled "Vision 2050" presented at SXSW, the Aerospace Industries Association (AIA) predicts that by 2050, the use of flying taxis and other autonomous drones will be widespread, mainly thanks to artificial intelligence.

"For me, artificial intelligence is easier in the air," said Scott Drennan, director of innovation at Bell. "There's a lot of space up there and so we have a lot of room, we have a third dimension to maneuver in.

"It's not the Wild Wild West up there," he added. "I think the rules of the sky are more defined than the rules of the road."

Another advantage to flying cars is their GPS, said Anil Nanduri, vice president of Drone Group at Intel.

"GPS precision today is a couple of meters plus minus," he said. "For ground-based vehicles... it's not accurate enough to have the precision you need. But once you go up to third dimension, it's enough."

For those still skeptical about driving in the skies, tech reporter Aarti Shahani has only this to say: "If you had told me 10 years ago that I would open something called an app to order a car driven by a stranger for my mom who lived 3,000 miles away, I'd tell you you were crazy.

"And actually, that's what I do now all the time for her."

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