

Phoenix rises with driverless Waymo signups

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Credit: Waymo

Waymo's autonomous cars have started picking up passengers in Phoenix, Arizona. Let's focus on autonomous: Nobody is at the wheel. Riders-only.

Don't expect to hail one if you visit Phoenix and need a hotel. It's not a public service program. The Phoenix trips are taking passengers who had signed up as part of an early rider program, said Sean Szymkowski in [Roadshow](#). They were all in all offered to about a few hundred people. The riders who signed up also signed nondisclosure agreements.

What is Waymo? It's Alphabet's self-driving car service. While readers may already have heard of it enough times, the remarks by its CEO John Krafcik who [spoke](#) at the IAA Frankfurt auto show back in September, were refreshing.

"First, we are not Google. And, we are not a car company. We're also not a self-driving car company."

OK, we're waiting:

"Rather, we are a [technology company](#), building the world's most experienced driver: The Waymo Driver. Our mission is to make it safe and easy for people and things to move around the world." He said at the time, September 12, that "we've been testing at small scale in fully driverless mode since 2017—with no trained human driver behind the wheel. And we've begun to responsibly ramp up our driverless offerings to riders in the Metro Phoenix area."

One could easily imagine their thinking about the laid-back traveler liking the idea of not having to be behind the wheel but Waymo is thinking of broader audiences. Krafcik said that the freedom that comes with a driver's license isn't always a possibility. Even some who do not see driving as a hassle but as an enjoyable activity in command of the road cannot always get what they want. "In many developed countries, more than 20% of adults are unable to drive due to [vision impairment](#) or other disabilities."

No matter who the targeted passenger, Waymo aspires to a favorable record of safety. He said they have put Waymo Driver through "what must be the world's longest and toughest ongoing driving test. We've driven autonomously more than 16 million kilometers on public roads, over 16 billion kilometers in simulation, and across more than 25 cities in the US."

In a much-quoted report by Joseph White in [Reuters](#) on Monday, Waymo Chief Executive John Krafcik said company ambitions were not resting alone on a "robo-taxi" business but also, as future revenue, on delivery services.

The Reuters report told of different ideas under consideration by Waymo as to how its technology can impact transportation in the future.

Two of the ideas that the CEO noted in the Reuters report: 1. Waymo was testing its system on trucks in Michigan, Arizona and Georgia with an interest in trucking applications and 2. Selling driver technology to a carmaker.

Also, according to Reuters, Waymo has deals to use minivans made by Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV and Jaguar iPace sport utility vehicles in its robo-taxi fleets.

At this point, though, it is more useful to clarify the safety standards that reside in a "Levels" system when facing the future of self-driving cars together with Waymos' goals.

"From our perspective at Waymo, a Level 4 vehicle is a vehicle in which you can put a rider who doesn't have a driver's license or vision and they could move from point A to point B," Krafcik said. "If you need a driver's license, you can't call it self-driving."

(As *Roadshow* pointed out, "Most companies testing [autonomous cars](#) continue to place a human backup driver behind the wheel.")

Forbes' Alan Ohnsman, who covers transportation, [walked](#) readers though where Waymo stands on the levels system.

"The SAE [Society of Automotive Engineers] spectrum goes from

Levels 0 to 5, from no automation to full automation, in which a human never needs to operate the vehicle and it can drive virtually anywhere. Waymo and other companies developing robotaxi and automated trucking systems target Level 4, in which the vehicle operates autonomously within a well-mapped, geofenced area."

For Waymo, he added, that area was limited to suburban Phoenix for now.

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