

Los Angeles is about to get its first robotaxi test fleet

2 September 2021, by Russ Mitchell



Credit: Ad Meskens via Wikipedia

It's not uncommon in the Bay Area to spot a driverless test car sharing the highway, a whirling lidar array atop its roof. Not so much in Southern California, where little robot car testing has been conducted to date.

That will change soon. Driverless car technology company Motional announced that it will deploy "in the near term" a test fleet of new Hyundai Ioniq 5 [electric cars](#) in and around Los Angeles, fitted with its robotaxi technology.

The Boston-based company earlier this month announced a major expansion of its Santa Monica office, including the addition of more autonomous vehicle engineering specialists.

Motional is a joint venture of Hyundai Motor Group and motor vehicle parts supplier Aptiv. The Hyundai Ioniq 5 compact electric SUV is a landmark product for the South Korean company, built on a new platform specifically engineered for electric vehicles. It's due to hit the U.S. market this

fall. (Hyundai is based in Seoul. Its U.S. headquarters is in Fountain Valley, highly visible alongside the 405 Freeway.)

Hyundai and Motional are working closely together to integrate hardware—sensors and the car itself—with a driverless software system. The Ioniq 5 will be fitted with 30 sensors including radar, lidar (which is like radar but uses laser beams in place of radio waves), ultrasound and cameras. "A lot of people think autonomy is just a software game, but integration with a vehicle is a complex task," Motional Chief Executive Karl Iagnemma said.

The main reason for Motional's L.A. expansion, though, is the need to attract scarce technical talent. "When most people think of Los Angeles, they think of Hollywood. I think of engineers," Iagnemma said. "Some of the best machine learning engineers are in L.A."

Of course, there are even more of them in Silicon Valley, where Motional is also setting up its first research and development office. But recruitment of the limited number of machine learning specialists there is highly competitive.

Motional is recruiting skilled workers from several industries, most prominently from among consumer app creators, "apps that rely on computer vision, on modifying images," Iagnemma said. He didn't talk about specific companies, but social media's Snap would top such a list. Snap's Santa Monica headquarters is a short drive from Motional's Southern California base. The company said it plans to increase its L.A.-based workforce to more than 100 employees.

The "great university ecosystem in Southern California" will also be tapped by Motional recruiters, he said.

Motional is already testing cars in Singapore, Las Vegas, Pittsburgh and Boston. In L.A., robotaxi

testing will roll out with trained test drivers. The company won't say how many robot cars it will put on the road. The cars won't be picking up passengers until the technology is ready and regulators approve a commercial service.

The company has struck a partnership with ride-hailing [company](#) Lyft, which also has a similar partnership with Argo AI and Ford. Lyft has said it plans to launch a robotaxi service in 2024 but has offered scant details.

Argo isn't Motional's only competitor in driverless vehicle systems. Others include Waymo, Zoox, Cruise and Aurora.

Asked what special challenges Los Angeles will present to robot car development, Iagnemma's answer was unsurprising: "congestion."

He added that because Los Angeles boasts such a colorful car culture, "it's gotta be a place where you can watch a robotaxi cruise by."

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