Problem solved! What was the problem?

By Dean Tiffen

Sandra and I recently returned from a 7-week 'break' in Europe and stopped off in San Francisco on the way back to NZ. Opting to stay 'downtown' near Union Square we soon noticed something different in the traffic as we strolled through the CBD. There were quite a few white Jaguar I-Paces with weird contraptions on them circulating the city blocks with no one at all in the driver's seat!

Not something from Star Trek but an autonomous Waymo Jaguar I-Pace

At first, I thought these were Google Street-mapping vehicles, or similar, but there were quite a lot of them, and many had passengers sitting in the back and/or the front passenger seat;- but no one in the driver's seat!

Curiosity now fully elevated I discovered that they are in fact Waymo vehicles –

"*The world's first autonomous ride-hailing service*".

So ok then, let's download the app and give this a go! "Heck No!" was the sanitised response from Sandra. And disappointingly I could not get the Google originated app to go immediately on my iPhone (Google and Apple need to learn to play nicer with each other) and we were short on time for me to resolve.

I did hear one user talking to someone as they ended their ride near where I was standing say when asked "How was the ride?"; "Great. Visiting San Francisco, we just had to give it a go" which made me wonder if most users were inquisitive tourists or locals genuinely using the service – which I think is pretty much limited to the central CBD area of San Francisco.

I then further wondered, sure the technology looks like a viable service in a relatively benign traffic environment like downtown San Francisco, but I had just spent 3 weeks driving in Italy from central Milan to Rome and I'm pretty sure Waymo is a long way off from being effective in Italy!

Italy's cities are significantly more congested, and every driver thinks they're Mario Andretti! They are, let's say, very assertive, in their driving with any Taxi ride in Italy usually being a white-knuckle experience at some stage – why must they have highly animated phone-calls with both hands waving for the duration of any ride is beyond me!

Navigating European Traffic in a Waymo

Spaces on Italian streets are fought over with the most "assertive" vehicle winning. And amongst the cars, trucks, buses, trams, the odd crazy cyclist, are 100,000 scooters who will put their machines, at speed, into any minute gap! How will a Waymo vehicle operate there? Good luck! You'd soon be wearing your morning coffee over your tablet while catching up on the news with the Waymo braking heavily and regularly as a hoard of scooters swarm around it! Or, heaven forbid, the Waymo's AI is self-learning, and in Italy would learn to become more assertive than the thousands of Mario Andretti's! Good grief!

But the other question I had, was what problem has this technology solved? Taxi drivers for the most part, are very useful. They'll help with luggage, offer suggestions on where you want to go, and even sensibly discuss sports – except in Christchurch. We think that the London Black Cab service is the best we've experienced, and I'd rather ride in a Black Cab than an autonomous I-Pace for now. How about you?

Dean