





A SUPER CHUTE

THIS RING IS THE racetrack on which the future of ground transportation might be riding. Deng Zigang, a professor at Southwest Jiaotong University, in Chengdu, China, stands in the center of a prototype designed to test the latest turn in maglev (magnetic levitation) train technology. Right now, the best maglev trains reach speeds exceeding 400 kilometers (250 miles) per hour. Yeah, that's fast, but researchers like Deng are confident that the train cars, which are suspended above the tracks by powerful magnets, can go much faster. At these speeds, upwards of 80 percent of the energy meant to provide propulsive force is wasted battling air resistance. By placing a maglev train inside a vacuum tube, Deng says his team can virtually eliminate speed's enemy. At 10 percent of normal atmospheric pressure, such evacuated tube systems might allow maglev trains to rocket along guideways at 3,000 km (1,860 miles) per hour.

THE BIG PICTURE

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