



HERE COMES DRIVERLESS RIDE SHARING

Cruise unveils the Origin, a fully autonomous SUV designed for app-controlled urban transportation

I recently drove from Silicon Valley to San Francisco. It started raining on the way and I hadn't thought to take an umbrella. No matter—I had the locations of two parking garages, just a block or so from my destination, preloaded into my navigation app. But both were full, and I found myself circling in stop-and-go traffic around crowded, wet, hilly, construction-heavy San Francisco, hunting for street parking or an open garage for nearly an hour. It was driving hell. ¶ So when I finally arrived at a launch event hosted by Cruise, I couldn't have been more receptive to the company's pitch for the Cruise Origin, a new vehicle that, Cruise executives say, intends to make it so I won't need to drive or park in a city ever again. ¶ The Cruise Origin is a six-passenger, autonomous, electric, SUV-size vehicle intended to disrupt not so much the car industry as urban transportation overall. Cruise (mostly owned by GM) does not plan to offer the Origin on the retail market. Instead, it will operate fleets of the vehicles as a ride-sharing service; screens inside are intended to give information about upcoming pickups and drop-offs. ¶ Uber, which launched the last big transportation disruption and has been preparing for the next by investing in its own autonomous vehicle research, might have some scrambling to do. ¶ Since the Origin won't be sold, the company isn't talking about pricing. ¶ However, Cruise CEO Dan Ammann did talk a lot about what the designers did to make this autonomous vehicle as inexpensive as possible to manufacture—production costs will be about half of those required to make today's all-electric SUVs, he said. The designers started with a new, all-electric platform, made all the sensor and computer systems

modular for easy replacement and upgrading, and took out everything driver-related, including rearview mirrors, windshield wipers, and, of course, the steering wheel.

CRUISE'S CTO, Kyle Vogt, presents the Origin, a driverless electric shuttle.

Besides reducing costs, those omissions left room for a big passenger compartment. I do have one quibble with the design, though: in the display vehicle, passengers faced each other in two rows of seats with lots of room in between. While this arrangement might be great for Vegas party limos, those of us who are motion sensitive need to face the front and have good sight lines in the direction of travel. And, frankly, even if I weren't motion sensitive, I don't necessarily want to spend my travel time awkwardly avoiding eye contact with a stranger.

"It costs a lot less to make than you would expect, it will last a million miles, and you can share it," Ammann said. The company estimates that the average urban dweller who relies on Cruise Origin for transportation will cut about US \$5,000 a year from personal transportation costs. "The key to making money is making a better user experience at a lower cost."

The vehicle is "fully engineered and on its way to production," Ammann said. Operating it as a driverless service still needs government approvals, however. —TEKLA S. PERRY

A version of this article appears in our View From the Valley blog.

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CORRECTION: In "Transgenic Salmon Hits U.S. Shelves" [January], we misstated the date by which U.S. food manufacturers must apply new labels to bioengineered foods. The correct date is January 2022.