Cruise plots its robotaxi return to the Bay Area

Almost a year since the horrifying crash in which one of its driverless vehicles ran over and dragged a woman 20 feet, Cruise is planning its return to the Bay Area. The company said in a post on X that it is deploying “several” manually driven mapping vehicles in Sunnyvale and Mountain View, with the goal of progressing to “supervised testing” with five autonomous vehicles later this fall.

“Resuming testing in the Bay Area is an important step forward as we continue to work closely with California regulators and local stakeholders,” the post reads. “This will allow our local employees to engage directly with our product as they refine and improve our tech through R&D.”

Driverless Cruise vehicles were once a common sight on the streets of San Francisco, but they all vanished after the incident on October 2nd of last year, in which a hit-and-run driver crashed into a woman, sending her flying into the path of one of the company’s robotaxis. The Cruise vehicle also collided with the woman, but rather than remain stationary until emergency services arrived, it pulled over to the side of the road with the victim stuck underneath.

In the immediate aftermath, the California DMV accused Cruise of withholding key information, including the fact that the vehicle was responsible for dragging the victim, and suspended its permit to carry passengers.

Cruise grounded its fleet nationwide and began the long process of reckoning with its mistakes. That included a total reshuffling of the leadership team, including the ouster of

CEO Kyle Vogt. Around 20 percent of the company’s employees were laid off, and Cruise was later ordered to pay $112,500 to the California Public Utilities Commission.

Since then, Cruise has restarted testing in a number of cities, including Phoenix, Houston, and Dallas. It also scrapped its plans for a purpose-built autonomous shuttle called the Origin. GM, which is Cruise’s parent company, recommitted to the project by dumping $850 million into Cruise.

In returning to the city where the inciting incident took place, Cruise is taking a big risk. But if it’s going to compete with its main rival Waymo, it needs to be back driving on its own home turf where both companies have a lot at stake.

https://www.theverge.com/2024/9/19/24249150/cruise-robotaxi-sf-return-manual-drive-autonomous