Tesla’s toughest competition ever was on display in Geneva

In the tech industry, the theory goes that Apple doesn’t go to trade shows anymore because it dominates the news cycle even when it doesn’t show up. The same goes for Tesla, which — despite caving and bringing its shiny new Model 3 to the LA Auto Show last fall — predictably skipped this week’s Geneva Motor Show.

The difference with this particular show, more than others past, is that it was filled to the brim with clear, serious competitors to Tesla. And I don’t just mean direct comparisons, with cars like the Jaguar I-Pace, which matches up almost spec for spec to something like the entry-level Model X. The show was also dominated by cars that slot into the parts of the market that Tesla thrives in. More luxury EVs and hybrids are coming than ever before, and for the rest of us, there are now multiple cheaper options for something other than the Model 3.

There’s never been a show floor this full of cars that resemble what Tesla’s been doing

The I-Pace is the most immediate challenge to Tesla’s dominance of the early EV market. It matches up well with the base version of Tesla’s SUV, the Model X 75D. It has similar range and acceleration, though the Model X is bigger and has more seats and storage space. But the I-Pace starts at $69,500 — $10,000 less than the Model X 75D and $5,000 less than the entry-level Model S. It’s coming soon, too, with orders open now and deliveries scheduled for the second half of this year.

Porsche's Mission E Cross Turismo concept.
Photo by Vlad Savov / The Verge

Until now, Tesla hasn't had such a direct competitor in the premium EV space. Rather, the only EVs that come close to matching Tesla on practicality, like the Chevy Bolt, tend to be more affordable, and therefore not as luxurious — or as focused on raw performance. The I-Pace changes that equation.

One car alone doesn't crowd the field. But Geneva was a showcase for a rush of coming EVs and hybrids. Porsche showed off a dazzling electric concept that is part Panamera, part crossover called the Mission E Cross Turismo. While it's been known that Porsche plans to add electric and hybrid vehicles to its fleet beyond the forthcoming all-electric Mission E sports car (which is thought to be the biggest challenge on the horizon for the Model S), this was the first time the company offered a look at what the rest of that future will look like.

Porsche executives also talked up how a new, hybrid 911 could become the company's most powerful 911 ever. (Maybe this version will stand a better chance than the 911R that got smoked by the Model S P100D last year on *Top Gear*.) If you're looking for exciting cars with outlandish performance based on electric technology, this year's Geneva Motor Show was a solid reminder that Porsche intends to be a leader in this space — especially after having been swept up in the larger Volkswagen Group Dieselgate scandal.

A prototype of the final production version of Audi's E-Tron Quattro all-electric SUV.
Photo: Audi

Sibling Volkswagen Group brand Audi will be right there with Porsche, and it teased the final version of the upcoming E-Tron Quattro this week in Geneva. It wasn't on the show floor; instead, Audi paraded a prototype of the all-electric SUV clad in black, white, and neon orange camouflage through the streets of the Swiss city. It's supposedly coming to Europe by the end of this year and will get to the US in 2019, bringing north of 200 miles of range, fast charging, and a couple other E-Tron models with it.

Even BMW, which has been a bit of a laggard in the EV market after jumping in early with the i3, finally announced this week that an i4 sedan is coming. And while Mercedes-Benz defied rumors that it might unveil its own all-electric SUV at the show, it still released a few photos of the new EQC drifting through the snow to remind everybody what's coming.



The all-electric EQC being tested in the snow.
Photo: Mercedes-Benz

For those looking for something more sensible, Hyundai premiered its new Kona Electric. Though we don't have final pricing on this all-electric SUV, it's destined to be more affordable than something like the I-Pace, with the long-range model (292 miles) filling out the currently thin middle of the EV market by sliding in alongside the Chevy Bolt and the Model 3. Meanwhile, the Renault Zoe — the best-selling EV in Europe — received a motor upgrade and maintained its 180-plus mile range.

(And for those focused on the purely ludicrous, we found out that even Tesla's second-generation Roadster will have some competition when it hits the road in 2020. Rimac's Concept Two matches or bests the new Roadster's specs on paper, though the boutique carmaker will only make 150 of them, and they're bound to be more expensive than Tesla's electric sports car.)

Then there were the hybrids. Bentley showcased a hybrid version of its beefy Bentayga SUV that will be available later this year. Volvo took the wraps off of its nearly 400-horsepower V60 hybrid station wagon (and a more modest 340-horsepower variant), which can be had as part of the company's new subscription model and boasts a suite of semi-autonomous features. Former Volvo sub-brand Polestar made its major auto show debut with the sleek Polestar 1 hybrid coupe, which is coming in 2019 and will bring two more models into the market behind it.

And even though Mercedes-Benz may have skipped out on debuting its fully-electric offering, it did roll out a four-door "family" version of its AMG GT performance car. Much like the new 53-Series models unveiled at this year's Detroit Auto Show, one of the new specs of the AMG GT gets the "mild hybrid" treatment for a little extra boost.



The Polestar 1 on display at the Geneva Motor Show.
Photo by Vlad Savov / The Verge

That's… a lot! And this rush of competition is coming at a time when Tesla is in a bit of a weird spot. The Model X and S are selling as well as ever, but Tesla's still having a tough time trying to get the Model 3 — the car that's really supposed to change things for the company, and for the market — out the door fast enough to keep up with a list of preorders that's a half million reservations long, let alone to a place where the company can start selling it to new customers.

At the same time, there's a clock ticking. Tesla is quickly approaching 200,000 EVs sold in the US. That sounds great, as it's an impressive number for a startup to hit when EVs are still decidedly niche. But when companies hit that benchmark, the $7,500 federal tax incentive that the government gives to EV buyers enters a phase where it decreases until it disappears completely. That will give a pricing advantage to new fully electric cars like the I-Pace and the Kona — assuming that the Trump administration doesn't yank the incentive completely in the coming years.

The pressure from non-US countries to move away from fossil fuels is shaping the market when it comes to hybrid and electric vehicles

But Trump aside, the industry is likely to keep moving toward hybrid and electric technology. Countries around the world are considering or enacting legislation meant to phase out fossil fuel vehicles in the coming decades. One of these is China, which is such a huge market that every major automaker is essentially scrambling to find a way in. That China is pushing EVs might alone be enough to dictate where the market is headed.

Whatever the case, Tesla has established itself as the early leader in the EV market, and there are things that will continue to set it apart from the competition. Autopilot is

still one of the most recognizable advanced driver assistance systems on the market. All three of the company’s models have class-leading range and performance if you’re willing and able to pay above the base level. And Tesla has a rockstar CEO who launches rockets, and now cars, into space, which isn’t nothing.

The coming competition is also scattered. Not all of these cars are scheduled to hit production immediately, and for many of them — the Kona, the V60, the Polestar 1 — it’s not exactly clear when they might leave Europe or China and come to the US.

But it was clear at this year’s Geneva Motor Show that the promises being made by car companies around the world about going electric are not just marketing smoke and mirrors. More eco-friendly options are on the way, even for larger or high-performance vehicles. It’s a movement that Tesla CEO Elon Musk has always claimed he wanted to inspire. After all, he wrote in the second Tesla “master plan” that the “point of all this was, and remains, accelerating the advent of sustainable energy, so that we can imagine far into the future and life is still good.” Whether or not you believe him, the wave is coming.

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