Watch Teslas drive around parking lots with no one inside them

Enlarge / Tesla Model 3.
Smith Collection/Gado/Getty Images

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Tesla’s long-awaited and long-delayed “Smart Summon” feature is finally being released to the general public, the company announced on Thursday.

“Customers who have purchased Full Self-Driving Capability or Enhanced Autopilot can enable their car to navigate a parking lot and come to them or their destination of choice, as long as their car is within their line of sight,” Tesla said in the blog post announcing Version 10 of Tesla’s software.

“Customers who have had early access to Smart Summon have told us that it adds both convenience to their trips and provides them with a unique moment of delight,” Tesla writes.

For safety reasons, customers must continuously monitor the vehicle—holding down a button in the Tesla app—as it moves through a parking lot. Tesla urges customers to maintain a line of sight to the vehicle at all times.

Tesla only started pushing out the official Version 10 release within the last 24 hours, but pre-release versions have been

available to members of Tesla's testing program, the Early Access Program, for several weeks. Videos can give us some idea of how these features work—though hopefully the final version will work a bit better, with fewer bugs.

Here's a week-old video, featuring a pre-release version of Smart Summon, that provides a nice overview of how the technology works (skip ahead to about 9:10):

[embedded content]
The Enhanced Summon screen in the Tesla app shows a blue dot representing the phone's location and a red triangle showing the location of the car. The owner can press the "come to me" button to have the car come directly to the phone's location. Or the owner can drag the map around to reposition crosshairs and instruct the car to go somewhere else. The feature can only be used within a limited range around the phone, which is outlined by a large blue circle on the map.

[embedded content]
The feature does more than just chart a straight line toward its destination. The car tries to follow driving lanes the way a human driver would. Sometimes this causes the car to take fairly long, circuitous routes, as you can see in the video above.

[embedded content]
In pre-release builds, cars would sometimes seem to get confused for no obvious reason. In the video above, for example, the car veers over toward a curb at the end of a row of parked cars, hesitates for a few seconds, then corrects course and continues to the destination.

As the technology becomes widely available to Tesla owners, we can expect to see a lot more videos released in the coming days. It will be interesting to see if Tesla has managed to iron out the issues seen in pre-release versions.

The technology is designed for use in private parking lots.

Ars asked both Tesla and federal regulators at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration whether it’s legal to use the technology on public roads, and we’ll update this story if we get a response.

It’s unclear who would be liable if a car caused damage while operating in Smart Summon mode. Tesla has designed the app only to work when the user holds down a button, monitoring the car’s progress. That could help the company argue it shouldn’t be liable in case of a malfunction. But there’s no guarantee that the courts would buy such an argument.

The Smart Summon technology was the most notable feature in Tesla’s Version 10 software, but the update came with a number of other enhancements as well. When the car is parked, Tesla owners will now be able to watch Netflix, Hulu, or YouTube videos or play the video game *Cuphead*. The car now has native Spotify support. You’ll also be able to tap an “I’m feeling lucky” button that navigates the car to a randomly chosen destination, or an “I’m feeling hungry” button that chooses a nearby restaurant.

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