

Waymo finally let a reporter ride in a fully driverless car

Caitlin O'Hara/Bloomberg via Getty Images

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It's been almost two years since Waymo first announced that it was testing fully autonomous vehicles on public roads. Not long afterwards, the company said it planned to offer a fully driverless service to the public by the end of 2018.

The rollout has been a lot slower than expected. Over the course of 2018, most of Waymo's cars continued to have drivers behind the wheel. When Waymo launched its commercial service in December 2018, every car had a driver behind the wheel.

But now Waymo seems to be cautiously moving forward with fully driverless technology. Last month, Waymo told people in its closed testing program that they'd start getting rides in driverless vehicles. Now in a new piece for Techcrunch, Ed Niedermeyer reports on his own experience riding in a fully driverless car.

Niedermeyer reports that the trip involved an unprotected left-hand turn, "busy city streets," and speeds as high as 45 miles per hour. Niedermeyer says that his 10-minute ride from a park to a coffee shop was uneventful—which makes sense given how carefully Waymo must have prepared for it.

Still, this represents yet another baby step in Waymo's journey toward full autonomy. And despite Waymo's slow pace of progress relative to expectations it previously set for itself, the company still appears to be the industry leader. No other company is testing fully driverless rides on the scale or at the speeds Waymo is.

Moving forward, the big question remains how soon Waymo can start offering fully driverless rides to the general public at a non-trivial scale. Waymo has been tight-lipped about the scale of its current driverless testing or how soon the technology might become commercially available.

Alphabet, Waymo's parent company, has spent hundreds of millions of dollars developing the driverless car technology. Last quarter alone Alphabet lost \$941 million on its "Other Bets," which includes Waymo and other Google "moonshot" projects. Alphabet has vast financial resources, but eventually the company is going to want a return on its investment.

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