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Premiere in Sion

Start of public testing of autonomous shuttles

Residents and visitors can now get around Sion with the PostBus self-driving shuttles. The authorities have granted approval for the pilot project in a specified area of the city. Self-driving buses carrying passengers on the roads in public areas are a first in Switzerland.

Since 23 June 2016, the official testing of self-driving PostBus vehicles has been under way in Sion. The fully electric vehicles, which were presented to the public for the first time last December, have been tested in recent months on private land. The authorities have now given the green light for the testing of this type of passenger transport in the center of the Valais capital.

First ever approval for passenger transport in public areas

The statutory regulations for the use of autonomous vehicles on public roads have not yet been finalized. As a result, special permits are required so that the pilot project can be implemented in the city of Sion. Both the Federal Roads Office (FEDRO) and the road traffic department of the canton of Valais have granted approval to PostBus. The tests will run until October 2017. All of the companies and institutions involved in the tests attach great importance to the safety of passengers and other road users. They have examined the technical and legal aspects relating to road traffic and passenger transport. To meet the requirements, the two autonomous vehicles have been further developed. They now have air conditioning, and feature permanent ventilation and windscreen wipers for optimum visibility through the windshield. A second battery with an output of 16.5 kW ensures greater autonomy of the vehicles, and thanks to a ramp, people with limited mobility can also use the shuttles. The autonomous vehicles have 11 seats and travel at a maximum speed of 20 km/h.

Trained staff

PostBus is responsible for the operation, safety and maintenance of the two autonomous shuttles, and has appointed specialized staff to fulfil these various tasks. Under the direction of an operations manager, a teleoperator uses a special fleet management system for the use and operation of the shuttles. If necessary, the teleoperator can stop the vehicles immediately on site or from a distance. He also trains the safety drivers who are on board for every journey the autonomous shuttles make. The safety drivers are responsible for monitoring operations, ensuring that the shuttles are in perfect working order, and the safety of passengers. They can apply the emergency brakes by pressing one of the two emergency buttons installed in the vehicle. The safety drivers also provide passengers with information and assist them with getting on and off (for example with wheelchairs or prams/pushchairs).

A flexible timetable with real-time information

Use of the autonomous shuttles is free of charge and the service offers passengers a flexible timetable. In the first phase, the service will run every afternoon from Tuesday to Sunday. There are several factors that determine whether the vehicles can operate: the weather forecast, the condition of the roads, and events and planned roadworks along the route. Passengers should therefore always check the website in advance to ensure that the shuttles are operating: www.postauto.ch/smartshuttle. The operators expect to be able to extend the operating times after the initial implementation phase. The goal is to operate according to a regular schedule.

The autonomous shuttles operate on a route in Sion's old town and serve several stops, two of which are fixed: one is at Place de la Planta, the other at Place du Midi (see map on the factsheet). The stop at Place du Midi has a screen that displays the location of the two vehicles in real time. Passengers can also use an app to check the location of the shuttles.

Service in remote regions

PostBus, the city of Sion and the canton of Valais – together with their partners in the academic world – want to test new forms of mobility. The EPFL for example is using the project for its academic research. During the project, HES-SO Valais-Wallis plans to examine the acceptance of this new technology among the population. There is also the question of whether it is possible to use autonomous vehicles in public areas – for example in pedestrian and car-free zones – or on company premises. As a provider of comprehensive mobility solutions, PostBus wants to create the opportunity to connect places that were not previously serviced by public transport. Part of this effort is serving the last mile. However, the objective is not to replace buses on existing routes with autonomous vehicles.

Information

PostBus Media Unit, 058 338 57 00, infomedia@postbus.ch

Jacques Melly, Canton of Valais State Councillor, 027 606 33 00

Marcel Maurer, Mayor of Sion, 027 324 11 00

Media Unit, Federal Roads Office (FEDRO), 058 464 14 91

Photos, video

Photos of the autonomous shuttles and informations: www.postbus.ch/smartshuttle

Enclosures

«Autonomous shuttles in Sion» factsheet with a map of the route

Explanatory video

<https://www.youtube.com/user/PostAuto1906/>