

Mercedes Will Deliver Bag of Coffee to You by Drone in Zurich

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Black & Blaze Coffee Roasting Co. packs the order and drones then fly to four fixed spots in inner-city Zurich, landing on the roofs of Mercedes-Benz Vito vans, which carry the parcel the last stretch.

Mercedes-Benz is taking the next step in an ambitious project to use drones for same-day delivery, with a three-week pilot in Zurich that will see mini copters shuttle bags of ground coffee to fixed points in the city.

As part of the trial, customers can place an order with Swiss online shopping platform Siroop on selected items from retailer Black & Blaze Coffee Roasting Co. The roaster packs the order on site, rather than delivering the goods to Siroop's logistics center. Drones then fly to four fixed spots in inner-city Zurich about 6.2 miles, landing on the roofs of Mercedes-Benz Vito vans, which carry the parcel the last stretch, while the drones fly back to Black & Blaze.

"We have the incredible opportunity to do the most comprehensive test of drone technology in an urban environment to date," Stefan Maurer, who heads future transportation at the Mercedes-Benz Vans unit, said on Sept. 27. "To validate our concept at this early stage with customers and project partners will help push forward the development of the technology."

The pilot program, which started on Sept. 24, is part of a 500-million-euro (US\$589 million) effort that Mercedes announced last year to speed delivery times for online orders. The company, a unit of Daimler AG, is one of many businesses that are racing to develop drone-delivery services, even as rules limit where the craft can fly.

Amazon.com Inc. in December made its first-ever drone delivery -- a television-streaming device and a bag of popcorn -- to a customer in the U.K., while convenience store chain 7-Eleven last year flew a parcel of chicken sandwiches and doughnuts to a private residence in Reno, Nevada.

Many industries are researching potential uses of drones beyond dropping the latest Internet shopping on people's doorsteps, such as railroad-track inspections, spotting criminals on the run or organ delivery for hospitals, though a regulatory structure for the aircraft is still in its infancy.

For Mercedes, the pilotless craft are components of a van prototype featuring a suite of on-board systems like digital sorting equipment that could cut in half costs for the final portion of a parcel's journey. While the drones won't

directly deliver to a customer's doorstep, they'll skip much of the inner-city traffic, and save one journey from retailer to logistics center.

The next step in Mercedes' plans is flexible drone delivery to individual vans, where the mini-copters meet the vehicles at random spots, the company said.

"We want to get an idea on customer demand for drone deliveries, and find out which products and segments work well for this," said Peter Rohn, chief operating officer of Siroop. "We also expect to get good insights on the practicalities involved for the retailer."