



## Tech Talk

### The Bot Shopping Companion (Piaggio Gita)©

by John McCarthy

Hi and a very warm welcome to this week's edition of Tech Talk. Having had to rely on crutches for the last couple of months following a heated argument with an escalator in the Gare du Nord, shopping expeditions anywhere have been the proverbial pain in the neck – not to mention the ankle - with my hands temporarily manacled as they are to crutch-handles. I've often wished I could be followed through the supermarket aisles by a buzzing, parcel-carrying drone such as the one planned by Amazon to carry all the shopping bags. Well, it would seem that Piaggio Fast Forward, a subsidiary of Piaggio, the Italian firm best known for making Vespa motor scooters - immortalised in the film Roman Holiday - have heard my telepathic cries for help as they've just released an intelligent, rather fetching cargo vehicle that can follow you anywhere – like a faithful hound – ready to lend a helping hand when you have too much to carry.

The Gita - which my EnglishWaves Italian colleague Barbara informs me means 'trip' - is a 66 cm tall luggage compartment which resembles a drum-like cylinder turned on its side, with multiple cameras embedded within its shell, and fitted with two rubber treads which are slightly larger than the drum, thereby allowing the whole thing to roll effortlessly along indoor and outdoor surfaces at speeds of up to 35 kilometres per hour. There's a compartment accessed through a hatch on top, which can carry up to 18 kg for 8 hours between charges. Normally, it follows at walking pace behind its electronically belted human master – not just any belt, mind you, as this one has cameras built in which connect through WiFi to the perambulating robot, enabling Gita to follow and hopefully circumnavigate any pedestrians, joggers, roller-skaters, prams or dogs that may get in the way.

Apart from the FOLLOW your master mode, Gita can also be programmed to be autonomous, which enables it to map out an area and trip on its own. Purchase three or four and this would be ideal for the heavy-duty monthly shopping as they can communicate with and work together, either following you or heading off alone to a pre-assigned waypoint which could, of course, be your home. Add to this the fact that Piaggio Fast Forward is also working on a larger model which can handle up to a hundred kilos, and you have the possibility of exploring potentially more lucrative horizons ...

In the near term, there will be a dozen or so Gitas deployed in a variety of B2B pilot programmes and projects in the States, performing a multitude of tasks such as carrying tools for workers, guiding people through airports, assisting companies with their deliveries, in college campuses and towns. Other companies, such as Starship Technologies, started by two of the founders of Skype, are also getting in on the act, and their six-wheeled robot is currently being tested by Just Eat to deliver meals to its customers in London. Other of these models are whirling around delivering packages and groceries in Washington DC and parts of Silicon Valley. The company claims that its robots have covered tens of thousands of kilometers in 16 countries and 59 cities. They have also "encountered" over 3.1 million people.

It's easy to see the attraction of these bots. They don't engender the same public fear as other kinds of delivery vehicles, as for instance, driverless cars which are potentially far more dangerous as they're bulkier and faster, and flying drones which can hypothetically drop from the sky and decapitate a hapless pedestrian. Add to that eco-friendly credentials – the potential to reduce pollution by taking vans off the roads, plus of course reduction of costs as an added inducement, so it's just a matter of time before we see these at our doorstep.

Thank you for listening, join me next week for some more Tech Talk here on EnglishWaves.