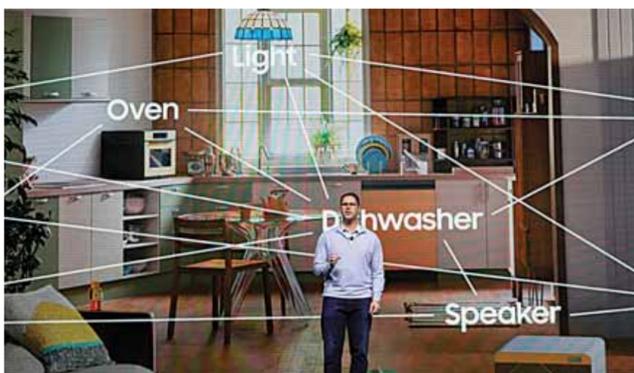


CES TECH FAIR OPENS UNDER PANDEMIC SHADOW



A vehicle with Luminar LiDAR based Proactive Safety pre-collision braking crash avoidance technology stops to avoid a child-sized test dummy as it is demonstrated on a test track at the Las Vegas Convention Center ahead of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada. —AFP photos



The Consumer Electronics Show (CES) throws open its doors to thousands yesterday in Las Vegas despite surging COVID-19 cases in the United States, as one of the world's largest trade fairs tries to get back to business. After a series of high-profile companies like Amazon and Google cancelled over climbing virus risk, the return of the in-person convention was cast in doubt.

But organizers cited their vaccine and mask requirements while insisting the show - with its mix of journalists, entrepreneurs and tech lovers from around the world - had to go on. "Despite a few well-publicized cancellations amongst our exhibitors, we have over 2,200 exhibitors here at CES 2022 in Las Vegas, and all of them are counting on us to move forward," Steve Koenig, a vice president from the group that runs the convention. "Why? Well, because these businesses are looking for investors, they're looking for partners, they're looking to conduct business," he added.

Some health experts have voiced caution that people may not universally respect the mask mandate, and noted that daily testing would be a useful tool to keep the spread in check. The event has been cut back by a day to end Friday, and the scale of the show will be sharply reduced with fewer than half the roughly 4,500 exhibitors that turned up for the last in-person edition in 2020 - just before pandemic lock-



SmartThings Head of Products & Engineering Mark Benson speaks during the Samsung keynote address at CES 2022 at The Venetian Las Vegas.

downs hit the United States. Badge-wearing attendees pulling suitcases have begun trickling in, some with a bit of trepidation.

'We are concerned'

"We are concerned and worried given the situation and the spike in the cases," said exhibitor Bhavya Gohil, who added he was vaccinated and that the organizers' precautions were reassuring. "But definitely yes, we are still

worried of what could be the outcome," he noted. The show is held in a hybrid format, in person but also online, using software developed by Web Summit, a European technology conference.

"There's no walking, there's no noise, there's no distractions," Paddy Cosgrave, Web Summit founder, said of the upsides of joining online. "But I don't personally believe that you can mimic online the quality of an actual in-

person, humans-to-human interaction," he added. Despite a thinner crowd, the show floor will still hold firms hawking everything from quirky gadgets to technology aimed at humanity's deepest concerns. One of the top items on the menu for the 2022 edition is transportation, increasingly electric and autonomous.

Space-related technologies are making a strong entrance, after a year that saw peaking interest in space tourism and the development of satellite internet. And of course, the metaverse is on everyone's mind, although its definition remains fluid at this stage. The concept refers to the emergence of a world where digital and real worlds are combined, which humans will access via augmented and virtual reality equipment. Born out of science fiction, it has become one of tech's hottest topics since Facebook announced colossal investments in this field and renamed itself Meta.

But for now, the industry is focused on more immediate challenges, such as global chip shortages and supply delays, which are delaying new product launches. Deals and business are, not surprisingly, top of mind for those who have decided they had to attend CES in person. "I do think that people are still going to want to do business and this is a show where a lot of business gets done," said exhibitor Vanessa Camones. "A lot of people don't want to lose that opportunity." —AFP

Space business: Final (profitable) frontier

The snub-nosed craft resembles a shuttle-airplane mashup, and is the latest entrant in a profit-seeking push with staggering potential - and risks - for humans to visit, work or even live in space. The display of technology like the life-size model "Dream Chaser" ship at the CES tech show in Las Vegas is a sharp signal that the commercial space era is upon us.

Experts see a path for companies to power an unprecedented era of rapid advances, but with the near certain peril that space disasters will occur and lives will be lost. Sierra Space, a subsidiary of private aerospace contractor Sierra Nevada Corp., plans to have the 30-foot (nine-meter) "Dream Chaser" flying missions this year, making the reusable spacecraft key to its off-Earth ambitions.

"Before governments were the only ones that could do it. Now, it's getting down to regular human beings who can get a ride to space," Neeraj Gupta, the company's general manager of space destinations, told AFP.

The craft is meant to carry people and equipment to and from commercial space installations the company envisions building in the next decade, including a system of inflatable structures to house humans in orbit.

Sierra has a deal with NASA for unmanned flights to the International Space Station that are to start this year, and is working with Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin to develop a commercial outpost off-Earth. "We really see a market opening to take more and more people to space," Gupta added. Commercial space efforts have been growing rapidly and captured lots of attention, especially launches of Elon Musk's SpaceX rockets that have been carrying astronauts for NASA. Bezos's own spaceflight last year alternately fascinated fans and outraged critics of the so-called "billionaire space race".

Space risks

Yet companies like Sierra are proposing something in addition to tourism - a com-



A full sized crew model of the Sierra Space Dream Chaser space plane is displayed ahead of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada. —AFP

mercial hub in space that could be used to make products, and a ship that can provide transportation. A video of their "space plane" shows the unmanned version of the craft cruising back to Earth and landing on a runway like any other commercial aircraft. Companies have proposed a series of ideas which until recently sounded like long shots, such as asteroid mining - but they have also suggested less far-fetched biomedical applications or production of some types of technology.

Mason Peck, an astronautics professor at Cornell University, said that until the last five years making things in space and bringing them back to Earth just didn't make sense. "Now there are companies... who are actually focused on this question: How can I make a buck in space?" he told AFP. "This has never been the way that people articulate the benefits of space. It's always been something a little bit broader, like the benefit to mankind or humanity or the sake of science," he added.

But the power of profit has the potential to vastly accelerate efficiency, technological advances and capacity in ways that is not in the slow and purposely deliberate approach of NASA or the European Space Agency. "It's pumping more money into the space industry. Technology improves, cost goes down so everybody benefits," said Mike Gruntman, a professor of astronautics at the University of Southern California. This would come as NASA has agreements that are part of the agency's efforts to enable an American-led commercial economy in low-Earth orbit.

Yet the prospect of increasing activity in space which could be done by profit-seeking companies carries very real risks. "There is certainly going to come a time when there will be tragedy and death and destruction as a result of this as there is with everything. There's car crashes, bridges fail, trains derail," Peck added. "The next William Shatner we send to space might not make it back... and that will be terrible. But these are not reasons not to do it," he said referring to the Star Trek star's trip on a Blue Origin launch. —AFP

RIO DE JANEIRO CANCELS CARNIVAL STREET PARADE OVER OMICRON



In these file photos, performers take part in a street party during the annual 'Ceu Na Terra bloco', in the run up to Rio's carnival, in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). —AFP photos

Authorities in Rio de Janeiro announced on Tuesday the cancellation of next month's carnival street celebrations due to an increase in COVID-19 cases brought on by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant. It is the second year running that the coronavirus has forced the Rio street parade, which was due to take place from February 25 to March 1, to be called off. "The street carnival in the form that took place in 2020, which did not happen in 2021, will not take place in 2022," Mayor Eduardo Paes said in a live broadcast on social media platforms.

The street parade by musical bands called "blocos" is different to the better known procession by samba schools that takes place in Rio's Sambadrome. The Sambadrome can hold 70,000

people in a stadium that allows authorities to control those that enter. Amongst the options available to them are proof of vaccination, a negative COVID test and the wearing of masks for those in attendance. "The street carnival, given its nature and its democratic aspect, makes any type of control impossible," said Paes.

In 2020, there were an estimated seven million revelers for the days-long street parades, according to the Riotour travel agency. Although previous meetings between Rio authorities and the blocos failed to reach a compromise, new talks are planned for Friday where the musical groups association president Rita Fernandes told AFP they will make "a more decentralized proposal." The arrival of the

highly contagious Omicron variant, coupled with an increase in social gatherings over Christmas and the New Year, has seen COVID cases soar in Rio.

New COVID cases jumped from 21 on December 14 to 458 just two weeks later. So far, though, the rise in cases has not led to a significant increase in hospital admissions or deaths. Four fifths of Rio's population have had at least two vaccine doses while almost a quarter have also been given a booster shot. Some 67 percent of the South American country's 213 million population are vaccinated with two doses, while 12 percent have had the third. Almost 620,000 people in Brazil have died of coronavirus, second only in the world to the United States. —AFP