

AUTO INDUSTRY

Look out Astro! It's a flying car

■ It may be scary to contemplate in South Florida's already insane highways, but flying cars will soon be available.

BY MARK CLOTHIER AND MARY JANE CREDEUR
Bloomberg News

A group of Massachusetts Institute of Technology-trained engineers is trying to go where no corporation has gone before: building a profitable business selling flying cars.

The Terrafugia Transition seats two and can take off and land from more than 5,000 public U.S. airfields. It can be driven on any road and runs on the same gasoline as high-performance cars. So far, the

company said, 95 people have put down at least \$10,000 to reserve one of the \$279,000 planes. Depositors include pilots and the wealthy in search of the latest toy.

Whether the flying car gets off the ground or not, it's a reminder — amid all the talk of mileage standards and profit margins — that cars have always been about dreams, from Marty McFly's DeLorean to autos with propellers that turned into boats. Indeed, Carl Dietrich, Terrafugia's founder and chief executive officer, has dreamed about this since he watched reruns of *The Jetsons*, the cartoon where George Jetson commuted to his job in a flying car.

An aeronautical engineer and pilot, Dietrich is also practical. It

wasn't until 2004, when the Federal Aviation Administration lowered the barrier for getting a pilot's license and created a new category of aircraft, that he decided there was business potential.

"The sense I've gotten in having conversations is, 'The flying car is something I was promised a long time ago and I want it,'" Dietrich said. Customers "don't care about practical arguments. They need to have it as part of a collection. Our long-run goal is to make this not just a novelty, but something really practical."

The Transition will be on display at the New York auto show, which opens to the public Friday,

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BY LAND OR AIR: The Terrafugia Transition uses the same gas as high-performance cars and can be driven on roads.

RESTAURANTS



PHOTOS BY DEEBA YAVROM/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

SERVICE WITH A SMILE: Jorge Llapur, left, co-owner of Cuban Guys, speaks with customers Eddy Barroso and Janette Ramirez at the Cuban Guys fast food restaurant in Hialeah.

CUBAN FAVORITES IN A HURRY

The Hialeah location is the first in what owners hope becomes a chain of upscale fast food eateries offering Cuban sandwiches and more.

BY ELAINE WALKER
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Jorge Llapur wants to take the Cuban *frita* to the masses in South Florida.

Welcome to Cuban Guys, where the seasoned hamburger patty comes topped with fried shoestring potatoes on a toasted Cuban bun. It's served in a stylish red, white and blue fast-food setting, at a bargain price of \$3.50.

Llapur and his partners launched the new restaurant concept earlier this year in Hialeah and are hoping to build a South Florida regional chain, combining the Cuban favorites with the convenience of a fast-food restaurant. While the *frita* is the star, the menu also includes a variety of Cuban sandwiches, rice bowls, salads and breakfast served all day.

"It's about bringing the professionalism and efficiencies of a chain restaurant together with the flavor of authentic Cuban food," Llapur said. "We know the Cubans love us already. We're trying to earn the palates of the non-Cubans as well."

The *frita* patties are hand-formed from 100 percent beef and seasoned with a distinctive mix of spices. Shoestring potatoes are cut and fried in-house every day. Other sandwiches include a *pan con bistec* (steak sandwich) and *medianoche* (pork, ham and cheese). The menu includes three varieties of homemade flan and homemade Cuban-style ice cream sandwiches on thinly sliced poundcake. The average check is between \$8 and \$10.

Vivian Hernandez discovered Cuban Guys recently when she



A SPECIALTY: Co-owners Jorge Llapur, left, and Isaac Skalkr, right, hold their *frita* sandwich.

was visiting her sister and liked it so much she came back the next day. She was having a hard time deciding which she liked better: the *frita* or the *pan con bistec*. The Hialeah restaurant is at 3174 W. 76th St.

"It's excellent, probably better than what you get in Cuban restaurants," said Hernandez, a teacher who lives in Pembroke Pines and

can't wait for one to open closer to her house. "You get the best of both: something home-cooked and fresh, plus quick-service."

Initial results have been so strong that Llapur and his partners are already looking for additional locations in strip shopping centers in Kendall, Pembroke Pines, Mid-

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SOUTH FLORIDA'S ECONOMY

Job security gets stronger

■ Fewer people are filing for their first unemployment benefits. Job cuts also are dropping as businesses feel bolder about hiring.

BY DOUGLAS HANKS
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Job security continues to improve in South Florida.

New numbers show first-time unemployment claims hit their lowest levels since 2008, when the recession was gaining steam nationally. Roughly 13,400 people in Broward and Miami-Dade filed their initial unemployment claims in March.

That's down 5 percent from a year ago. Using a trailing three-month average to smooth out quirks in the numbers from month to month, claims are off 22 percent from 2011 levels.

Unemployment claims have been dropping since the start of 2010, roughly the same time unemployment started inching back from historic highs. Broward's unemployment rate hit 8.4 percent in the latest seasonally-adjusted report, down from a peak of 10.5 percent at the end of 2010. In Miami-Dade, the seasonally adjusted rate is at 10.3 percent, down from 12.5 percent.

The improving numbers come as Florida business owners also are feeling more optimistic about hiring, according to a survey re-

leased Thursday by PNC Financial Services. One-fifth expect double-digit sales gains.

Business owners' outlooks for sales, profits, and hiring for the next six months are stronger than last fall and the best in the history of PNC's Florida survey, which began in 2003.

Eighteen percent say they expect to hire full-time employees during the next six months, up from 11 percent in fall 2011 and the highest since 2010. Only 7 percent plan to reduce full-time staff, the lowest since the survey began.

PNC's survey is based on 1,697 national interviews from Jan. 25 to March 12, including 151 interviews in Florida. The sampling error is plus or minus 8 percentage points.

A new survey on job cuts in the Sunshine State also suggests better numbers to come on the hiring front.

In Florida, there were 888 planned job cuts in March compared to 1,380 in February, according to the latest job-cut report on Thursday by outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Nationwide, planned job cuts declined in March to the lowest level since May 2011, as U.S.-based employers announced layoffs totaling 37,880 during the month, Challenger says.

The Sun Sentinel contributed to this report.

CONSUMER SPENDING

Retail sales climb a healthy 4.3%

■ Top-performing chains include Zumiez Inc., with a 14.1 percent bump in March sales, as well as Ross Stores Inc. and TJX Cos., both reporting a 10 percent rise.

BY SHAN LI
Los Angeles Times Service

Shoppers hit the malls in March and provided a boost for the nation's retailers, a good sign for consumer spending this spring despite continuing worries about rising gas prices.

Major chain stores posted a healthy 4.3 percent sales increase in March compared with the same month a year earlier, beating analysts' expectations of a more modest 3.5 percent rise. Discounters, teen retailers and apparel sellers all posted healthy sales increases, according to Thomson Reuters' tally of 20 retailers.

"Overall, it was a pretty decent month," said Judith Russell, editor of the Robin Report, a retail industry publication. "Initial spring sales were pretty good, and the weather helped motivate a lot of people to shop for warm-weather clothes."

Top performers were a mixture of high- and low-end stores. Action-sports chain Zumiez Inc. led the way with a 14.1 percent bump. Benefiting from a continuing thrifty mind-set, off-price retailers Ross Stores Inc. and TJX Cos. both reported a strong 10 percent increase. Luxury retailer Nordstrom Inc. saw sales rise 8.6 percent. Gap Inc., which has been struggling in the past year, beat expectations with a robust 8 percent jump.

Other retailers did not fare as well. Struggling teen clothier Wet Seal said sales fell 7.8 percent, while drugstore chain Walgreen Co. reported a 6.8 percent drop.

All told, about 59 percent of retailers beat expectations, Thomson Reuters said.

Many retailers benefit from a boost in March as students shop for spring break and families buy clothing and accessories in advance of the Easter holiday.

Results are based on sales at stores open at least a year, known as same-store sales and considered an important measure of a retailer's health because it excludes the effect of stores' openings and closings.