Cabs wired for back-seat surfers
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THE grim, dark future of science fiction has arrived and is soon to be found in the back of a cab.

In coming months taxi passengers around Australia will find the hi-tech, internet-accessible screens, first envisioned in the Johnny Cabs of Total Recall fame, are to become a present-day reality.

Melbourne-based TouchTaxi has signed the first deals in Australia that will put interactive touchscreens in the back of taxis.

The first roll-out is expected next month in Melbourne, to be followed quickly by other capital cities.

TouchTaxi director Ruwan Weerasooriya says the introduction of consumer-friendly, mobile internet access will revolutionise how people spend their time in taxis.

The new technology positions wireless PCs in taxi boots, which transmit to specially designed seat-back units.

The PCs will also host Global Positioning System and SMS technology. One of the benefits of including GPS will be that advertisers will know exactly where a taxi is located and be able to transmit locality specific advertising.

"For example, if you are American Express and you know the taxi is approaching an airport where Diners Club has a lot of advertising, you can trigger ads that will attract the passenger's attention away from the outside ads," Weerasooriya says.

The computers will communicate with the outside world using mobile phone technology, also housed inside the box.

Weerasooriya says the box is designed to be robust enough to withstand the rigours of taxi rides.

"We are using a combination of WiFi technology and GPRS to communicate with the box and update information on it," he says.

The inclusion of SMS technology means passengers can enter their own mobile numbers and receive SMS vouchers and other offers directly to their phones.

"Essentially, in our advertising you can do anything. You can do Flash, virtual reality, spin-arounds," he says.

"For example, with tourism operators, if you had a tree-top walk in Tasmania, you could click on a VR and walk around. You could also have a little ticker showing how many metres you are from that spot, and a suggestion to call a 1800 number to find out more."

Weerasooriya admits the technology is inspired by Total Recall's Johnny Cab, but says computers have not been robust and reliable enough for the job until now.
Fans of front-seat riding will be out of luck. Australian safety laws prohibit the units being installed on the dash.

So if you want to ride the wired taxi, you'll have to take a back seat.

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