

Star Trek got it wrong. Anyone can get to space

FLY ME TO THE MOON

Tours to space are taking off

LOOKING FOR AN ADVENTURE THAT IS LITERALLY OUT OF THIS WORLD? TWO COMPANIES ARE OFFERING TRIPS OF A LIFETIME FOR THE PERSON WHO HAS EVERYTHING. TOURISTS CAN NOW FLY TO SPACE AND BACK FOR LESS THAN THE TIME IT TAKES TO ENJOY A CUP OF COFFEE. LIZ MOSCROP REPORTS

SPACE - THE FINAL FRONTIER – inviting us ‘to boldly go where no man has gone before.’ Thus ran the message drummed into anyone who watched ‘Star Trek’ regularly in his or her youth. Back when the TV show was at its height in popularity, the idea of travelling away from the earth’s atmosphere was an

adventure possible to only an elite few.

TICKET TO RIDE

Now it seems almost anybody can become an Astronaut, so long as they have the bucks to spend. Two companies in particular have opened up a whole new travel universe. Virginia US-based Space Adventures and Virgin Galactic, which operates out of the Mojave Desert and is an offshoot of the mighty Virgin empire. Since 2001, space has been officially open to tourists. The name Astronaut is derived from the Greek words ‘Astron,’ which means ‘star’ and ‘Nautēs’, which means ‘sailor’. The stuff of science fiction has become a reality. Signing up is just as easy as going on a girl’s weekend away. You can book your places online and Space Adventures will fly you on suborbital flights, on voyages to the earth’s orbit or even ferry you round the moon if you want. Flights will leave from spaceports both on earth and in space, visit private space stations, and you’ll travel on board dozens of different vehicles. Many have already journeyed to orbit. Says Stacey Tearne, VP of Communications: ‘It is the ultimate journey. People travel on a parabolic arch, reach space and come back down. The whole thing takes around 25 minutes.’

Space Adventures has organised flights for the world’s first private space explorers, including Anousheh Ansari, the first female tourist, last year. It offers a variety of flights, including a seat on spaceflight missions to the International Space Station (ISS), Zero-Gravity flights, and cosmonaut training. The company’s advisory board

includes Apollo 11 moonwalker Buzz Aldrin and Russian cosmonaut Yuri Usachev. Flights take place in a Russian Soyuz rocket and head to the International Space Station (ISS).

ALL-ENCOMPASSING

Virgin Galactic has teamed with pioneering aircraft designer Burt Rutan of Mojave Aerospace Ventures to build an aircraft that can accommodate almost anybody, regardless of physical fitness. ‘The deal with Mojave Aerospace Ventures is just the start of what we believe will be a new era in the history of mankind, one day making the affordable exploration of space by human beings a real possibility,’ Richard Branson enthused. Virgin has sold 200 seats on its flights and aims to start operations in 2009. Tickets cost \$200,000 and deposits start from \$20,000. Virgin Galactic says it wants to end the ‘exclusivity attached to manned space travel.’ Er...I suspect there won’t be too many people out there with \$200,000 disposable income to chuck at a space flight, but a girl can dream... The company says it is creating a craft that will fly almost anyone to space without the need for extensive training. Training will take three days at the spaceport itself.

BEAM ME UP

How does it work? Virgin’s spaceship, ‘SpaceShipTwo’ will carry six passengers and two pilots. The vehicle locks on to a carrier aircraft, the ‘mothership’. It is then towed to 50,000 feet attached, where it breaks off and ignites its hybrid rocket. It then climbs to 360,000 feet in around 90 seconds at just

over three times the speed of sound. Shortly before it hits its maximum altitude, it folds its wings in preparation for re-entry into the earth’s atmosphere. When it reaches the upper atmosphere, its folded wings act as brakes, slowing it down. When it reaches 60,000 feet, the wings convert back to their original position and the craft glides back down to the spaceport.

ONE GIANT STEP

Want to go to the moon? For a mere \$100 million, you can take one of two seats on board Space Adventures’ Lunar Expedition, scheduled to take place four years after the first person has signed up. You will begin your journey to the far side of the moon on board a Soyuz spacecraft. You’ll subsequently launch from an unmanned rocket booster, which will hook up with your spacecraft in low-earth-orbit. Once the firing of the booster is complete, the two systems will separate and you will continue on to the moon. The company is yet to confirm participants on this trip, but Tearne says that it has received some expressions of interest. Watch this space, as they say.

LOSE WEIGHT NOW, ASK ME HOW

For those of us without quite so much disposable cash, instant weight loss is one of the side bonuses for anyone going on to Space Adventures zero-gravity tour. Says Tearne: ‘This has proved to one of our most popular experiences.’ I’m not surprised – count me in for a post-Christmas ticket. ✦

