

Town's residents hunt one-way trip to space

By ULI SCHMETZER
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ROME — The 180 citizens of Damanhur, Italy, have agreed unanimously to look for a spaceship that will carry them on a one-way journey to outer space.

The U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration told them it isn't yet working on a project that "utilizes so much human material."

"But we will keep your requirements in consideration," NASA said in a letter to the town.

The Soviet Union has not replied to Damanhur's request for assistance. Neither have the Japanese.

"It is not important when we leave. What is important is that we are ready to depart in the spirit of colonizers at any time," explained Coboldo (real name Roberto Sparagio), 31, a former journalist and the town's spokesman.

The people of Damanhur, which is named after the ancient Egyptian town of wizards and scientists, take their space project seriously. They have printed thousands of leaflets in English, French, German and Spanish and sent them all over the world.

The text reads: "Looking for spaceship. Trained for star-journeys through psychic simulator. Great environmental ability and proven capacity to survive. Mission: To contact intelligent beings in the universe and other dimensions. Scope: To create a new world."

In the bottom corner, rather sibilant, the advertisement adds: "Journey without return."

Damanhur is not an ordinary town. Located near Turin, the town was founded 10 years ago as an animist colony practicing aquaculture. The residents are mainly dropout intellectuals and professionals who think they live in communion and symbiosis with nature and its spirits, and have conquered the negative aspects of their human existence.

They say skepticism, perplexity, curiosity, envy, impatience and hate no

longer live in their city, "though we understand them."

In Damanhur, a work day is 12 hours long, no one smokes or takes drugs and everyone has adopted the name of an animal or a plant spirit.

The streets bear names like Street of Hope, Path of the Initiated, Shore of Time and Horus Square after the falcon-headed god who symbolizes the sun, light and rebirth.

A temple with an eternal flame on the altar stands in the Wood of Conscience, and the Grove of Prayer is for meditation amid statues of ancient gods. The self-proclaimed city-state's yellow flag has two squares, symbolizing the infinite and a never-ending quest for knowledge.

The future space travelers greet one another with one hand over the heart.

There are no social classes, no bosses.

Damanhur considers itself self-sufficient.

"Now we feel ready to go into the universe, well-trained but most of all psychologically and mentally concentrated. Our wealth is in the values we have inside ourselves," said Fauno, 26.

Just how determined the people of Damanhur are to fly off to the stars was expressed by Cormoran (real name Giampiero Ragusa), 32, a lawyer and cultural adviser to the nearby town of Baldissero, where Italian peasants still are very much attached to this Earth.

He told reporters: "We are even ready to be taken as jokers. But let it be clear: This is not an escape, there is no need for a round-trip ticket because we are spiritually ready to live in community even in another world."

With neither the United States nor the Soviet Union ready to rocket them into space, the people of Damanhur have written to a Texas oil millionaire for help in buying a spaceship.

"We know he is using millions of dollars to finance survival-in-space schemes," Coboldo said.

One way or another, Damanhur seems determined to blast off.

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