

Shooting for profit on the final frontier

A Las Vegas real-estate billionaire with an active interest in the paranormal, **Robert Bigelow** might seem an unlikely candidate to transform the commercial space industry. Yet he is making an impact. In 2006 his company, Bigelow Aerospace, launched a small prototype inflatable space station into orbit around the Earth, followed by a second in 2007. By 2010 he aims to have full-sized orbiting stations available for lease to paying customers who want to carry out research in space. He outlines his vision to **David Shiga**, and explains how UFOs helped kick it all off

What inspired you and got you excited about space?

I am old enough to remember Sputnik, but that wasn't the real impetus for me. I was born and raised in Las Vegas, and in my early childhood the city was a strange place. Scientists were working 75 miles away detonating nuclear bombs above ground. My friends and I saw many blasts when we were kids – many mushroom clouds, day and night. The other peculiar thing was the frequent sightings of UFOs by members of my family, as well as by friends and their parents.

I got the message from all this that there was a lot out there that we knew nothing about, and the UFO reports made me think that our rocket age must be very immature compared to these other things that were flying around. So I embarked on a lifetime quest to get into space if I possibly could. Rather than starting out as a scientist on my own, I thought I might be able to do more if I had financial resources. That was the main driver for getting into the real-estate world, where it is easier to make large sums of money than, say, as an attorney.

At what point did you decide you were ready to go for your dream?

When I turned 55, I decided I wasn't getting any younger and that I'd better start getting really serious about this. I had enough money,

so I decided to start searching for the right thing to invest in. I found out the hard way that buying into other people's companies was not a good idea at all. Most of the folks running small aerospace companies had no business skills. They had never run companies before, much less generated a positive cash flow.

Then I came across a magazine article that talked about NASA's TransHab programme, aimed at designing an inflatable module that would provide crew quarters for the international space station, and I thought, "This is a really slick invention, it has so much potential." Then I couldn't believe it when Congress decided to cut the funds and stop NASA from pursuing the project. To cut a long story short, I went after that programme and we eventually acquired the licences that NASA had. I founded my company in 1999, although we worked for two to three years without any licences and it didn't really get going until 2002.

Profile

Robert Bigelow graduated from Arizona State University in 1967 with a BSc in business administration. He made his fortune by founding the hotel chain Budget Suites of America in 1988. In 1995 he created the National Institute for Discovery Science to investigate reports of UFOs. He founded Bigelow Aerospace in 1999.

You've emphasised that you are not in the space-hotel business. So what is your business about?

Our business case is not based on tourism, nor on servicing NASA. Tourism and NASA may be a part of it, but they alone would not sustain a robust business activity. We are looking to the corporate world, to lease modules to major companies. They don't even have to buy them. Our main focus will be on serving professional astronauts and companies that want to do laboratory research in space or ones with other reasons to lease a module.

What sort of companies do you expect to be interested?

It could be pharmaceutical companies, or companies that offer services to hospitals and clinics. It could be companies doing R&D on nanotechnologies, or on all kinds of things. All the services they need would be incorporated into the lease agreement. Our own astronaut group would provide a lot of the services that the companies required on board, such as the labour and maintenance.

Are you willing to lose some money to achieve your goal?

I recognise that everything I have spent so far and what I might spend in the future could all be for nothing. I didn't get into this to make money. If I just wanted to die a well-off individual and that was my only goal in life, then I would have stayed in the businesses



that I have been in for 40 years. I would not have ventured out. Potentially there is a huge reward and earning capacity, but the risk is enormous. So yes, I could stand to lose an awful lot, but that is part of the recipe. If you are not willing to take on that kind of risk, then don't be in the game.

Do you think you will go into space someday yourself?

I would like to. I hope so.

What do you do in your free time?

I read a lot. I go to some ranches that I have. I like getting out in the desert and driving around. I know this area so well: I have been everywhere there is to go in southern Nevada

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and parts of Arizona, so I don't do that as often as I used to. I used to go bird hunting, but I don't really do that any more. When I started to deliberately miss my shots I knew my time was over. But my work is my hobby – aerospace really is my hobby.

How serious is your interest in the paranormal?

I have been actively involved in paranormal research for over 20 years. By that I mean I have funded my own organisation and other people's. The paranormal basket is quite sizeable. There are many subsets, and each could consume an entire lifetime of investigation. The UFO issue is just one of them. I recently attended a talk on remote viewing – the idea of being given a set of longitude and latitude coordinates and being able to determine what's at that intersection without actually being there. It's a type of psychic phenomenon.

Those kinds of subjects are fascinating to me. They are not explainable in any kind of normal scientific or medical context. I have been fascinated by that for decades, and have been closely involved in all kinds of programmes. I was a director for a number of years at the Rhine Research Center at Durham, North Carolina. It really is a lot of fun, and it's another area of exploration, as is space.

Is there any connection between that work and your space project?

That's an interesting question, and it's a tough one for me to answer. I would say possibly, and I need to let that go as my shortest answer. ●