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### The Times: Space Holidays Becoming Reality

From: Stig Agermose <[stig.agermose@get2net.dk](mailto:stig.agermose@get2net.dk)>  
Date: Sun, 2 May 1999 01:18:55 +0200 (MET DST)  
Fwd Date: Sun, 02 May 1999 07:23:03 -0400  
Subject: The Times: Space Holidays Becoming Reality

Source: The (London) Times.

Stig

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Saturday May 1 1999

TRAVEL

Nick Nuttall discovers why we may soon be telling high street travel agents: 'Fly me to the moon'

=A9

The Jetsons' cartoon world may before long become an accurate depiction of the way we live

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Space odyssey becomes reality

It is the ultimate holiday destination - yet it is less than 100 miles away. Space. The final frontier is opening up to tourists in the same way that Antarctica and the Arctic, once the exclusive preserve of the military and specialist shipping companies, were opened up by modern cruise liners.

Experts predict that space cruises to the Moon may be possible within 10 to 20 years, while several companies in America, Japan and Europe have been competing to be the first to take day-trippers to "astronaut altitude" - that is, space, 62 miles above Earth. Richard Branson this week outlined his plans for the new arm of his empire: Virgin Galactic Airways.

He said he expects to be able to take travellers on a two-hour jaunt into space for =A350,000 to =A375,000 within eight years. And he is in talks with several aerospace firms including one called Rotary Rocket, whose backers include the writer Tom Clancy.

"Finally it's come to the stage that it's going to be possible to look at taking people into space," Branson said.

Daimler Benz, working with the German space agency, disclosed earlier this month plans to build and launch the =A310 million Hotel Galactica, which will circle 300 miles above the Earth, by

2009.

It may sound like pie in the sky. But according to Arthur C. Clarke, author of 2001: A Space Odyssey and the British visionary who predicted satellites and mobile phones decades before they emerged: "The idea is quite practical. I am sure that space travel will be big business in the new millennium."

He believes space travel is at the stage aviation was at in 1910, when prizes were offered for the first non-stop solo transatlantic flight. Charles Lindbergh achieved that feat in 1927, heralding the start of worldwide commercial aviation and the dawn of the package holiday.

Robert Haltermann, a Washington DC-based space travel consultant who worked on Nasa's space shuttle programme, has another analogy: he believes the market is where the cruise ship industry was soon after 1839.

This was when Sir Samuel Cunard launched a fortnightly crossing between Liverpool and Boston with 63 fee-paying passengers. Nowadays, 4.4 million people take cruises each year.

The idea of holidays in space is not new. Much of the technology has existed for decades - after all, it is nearly 40 years since Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space.

Indeed, in 1967, Barron Hilton, chairman of the US Hilton Hotels Corporation, discussed the feasibility of an "Orbiter Hilton and Lunar Hilton". He predicted: "There will be travellers in outer space, and where there are travellers there must be Hiltons."

Now, more than three decades on, it looks as if Hilton's dream is closer to coming true.

According to John Spencer, executive director of the Space Tourism Society in Los Angeles: "A generation has grown up watching films and television on space and living with space missions. They want to go there too."

The race for space has prompted an unlikely union between tourism and science. Since the end of the Cold War, many engineers and aerospace companies, deprived of military contracts, have been focusing on designs for commercial space planes.

Another incentive is the Ten-Million-Dollar-X-Prize - an award offered by a consortium of interested businessmen to the first-privately funded team to take three people 62 miles or higher and back twice in a week.

Sixteen aerospace and holiday companies - 12 in America and four elsewhere, including Britain - are competing.

They are being sponsored by travel companies such as Space Adventures in Virginia. WildWings, a travel agent based in Bristol, is acting as UK agent for the company, which is backing several of the competitors. These include Bristol Space Planes of Bristol, set up by David Ashford, formerly with Hawker Siddeley, who has worked on projects including Concorde and the military Skylark rocket.

His Ascender space plane is designed to take off from an airstrip before switching to a rocket motor five miles up. The rocket then propels the small plane and its four passengers at nearly three times the speed of sound to an altitude of 62 miles.

Ascender then returns to the airfield about one hour later. Tourists get two minutes of weightlessness and "superb views of the Earth", according to the WildWings brochure.

Other designs nearing completion include the Eclipse Astroliner from Californian company Kelly. This is a space plane that is towed like a glider behind a Boeing 747 until, at 20,000ft, its three Russian-made RD-120 engines ignite, hurtling the craft and its passengers 100 miles up.

Another project is Pathfinder, from the Pioneer Rocketplane company in Colorado. It takes off like a high performance jet fighter, reaching up to 30,000ft.

"A tanker aircraft transfers 130,000 pounds of liquid oxygen into your vehicle's fuel tank. The rocket engine ignites. Suddenly you feel three to four times the force of gravity, pushing you deep in your seat. Two minutes later this space plane is 80 miles up," according to the brochure.

Surveys in Japan indicate that 70 per cent would like to go into space and would pay three months' salary to do it. Surveys in America have found 42 per cent are keen.

Business in Britain has yet to take off.

Only two people have paid WildWings a deposit for its =A355,000 Space Adventure package comprising six days of training, health screening, talks, accommodation, food and, of course, a trip into space. And the proposed first trip, originally scheduled for 2001, has been put back by a year.

Dr Madsen Pirie, president of the Adam Smith Institute in London, a right-wing think tank, is one of the two plucky ones.

He says he has been fascinated by astronomy and space since "building my first telescope when I was eight". He is convinced that the trip will go ahead and is certain that anyone now in their early twenties will eventually see affordable hotels and other leisure activities in space.

Space travel consultant Robert Haltermann reckons there will be no shortage of activities in a space hotel, including weightless or semi-weightless "dining, space games, dancing, stage productions and cosmos-gazing".

Other planned pursuits include space walks and space buggy rides on the Moon.

Should only a few holidaymakers cross the final frontier in the next few years, it could be because of the cost. Michael Heaney of the Space Frontier Foundation in New York believes prices for a space holiday at an orbiting hotel might be initially as high as =A3250,000.

Branson's project is a more modest =A350,000--=A375,000, and a week-long package to an orbiting hotel is being touted at up to =A39,375 by 2005 to 2010 by American firm Space Islands.

Haltermann believes whatever the initial costs, prices will eventually fall.

"Today there are more than 200 cruise ships accommodating nearly 4.4 million tourists a year. But it was once a luxury for only those few who could afford such extravagance," he says, adding that space tourism is likely to evolve in the same way.

Some cynics claim few will really want to boldly go. But supporters dismiss them as Luddites.

Robert Zubrin, chief scientist at Pioneer Rocketplane, says: "People say 'Grandma will never fly that way'. Well, that is what the railroad people said about airplanes in 1910."

#### WEBSITE:

WildWings

<http://www.wildwings.co.uk>

(0117-984 8040)

Space Adventures

<http://www.spaceadventures.com>

Nasa

<http://www.nasa.gov>

European Space Agency

<http://www.esa.int>

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\*Space odyssey becomes reality

\*Meanwhile, back on Earth

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