

For \$50 Million, Book Your Vacation in Space

A host of companies plan to offer trips that range from a quick, weightless jaunt to a months-long journey

By Robert Wall

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An unprecedented boom in the commercialization of space is lifting the hopes of an industry that has been trying to take off for years: space tourism.

Within the next few years, Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin, Elon Musk's SpaceX and a number of other lesser-known adventurers are hoping to start sending tourists into space.

Blue Origin is planning to offer 11-minute flights on its New Shepard capsule that can accommodate six people. Space Exploration Technologies Corp., as SpaceX is formally known, last year said it had signed up a tourist, a Japanese retail tycoon, for a trip around the moon, slated for around 2023.

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Aspiring astronauts be forewarned: It's mostly the super wealthy who'd be able to afford a trip into space, at least at first. For a stay of several weeks or even months, prospective tourists should expect to spend \$50 million or more. A shorter experience—a few minutes of weightlessness—might set you back less than \$1 million.

One approach to space tourism comes from hotel tycoon Robert Bigelow, who has spent years working on the idea of hosting people in space. A firm he founded, Bigelow Aerospace, makes inflatable orbital habitats that could attach either to the international space station or float

independently. The 330-cubic-meter space stations could accommodate six passengers. One smaller unit is already attached to the international space station.

Mr. Bigelow, who aims to start sending up tourists around 2021, says he'd like to bring some hospitality pizzazz into space: think virtual reality experiences and other excitement he's still keeping secret.

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He wants to make space travel accessible to nonbillionaires by creating ways for tourists to generate revenue on their trips, possibly via sponsorships or live TV feeds. "It is important that we can assist the tourist to generate income so it doesn't always have to be a billionaire tourist," he says. "It would be nice if you could cover half your cost in some kind of innovative effort that puts money in your pocket."

Analysts at UBS estimate that around 2030 space tourism could be a \$3 billion or more business a year, with

double-digit growth prospects. "While space tourism is still nascent, we think it will become mainstream as the technology becomes proven and cost falls," UBS said in a report.

The industry has had false dawns before. The first space tourist took to orbit in 2001, when investment-management mogul Dennis Tito spent a week as a paying passenger on the international space station. A few more have followed, but the business hasn't caught on widely.

Twelve years later, Mr. Tito backed a project that set its sights on taking tourists around Mars. The goal was to reach the red planet in 2018. It hasn't happened.

In 2004, a vehicle designed by Scaled Composites, now part of Northrop Grumman Corp., snagged the \$10 million Ansari X Prize to become the first reusable, commercial spaceship to fly into orbit. It was supposed to spark a boom in space travel. An offshoot has become the vehicle Virgin Galactic is using. It first flew in 2010, suffered a fatal crash four years later, and only resumed flight trials in 2018.

Industry officials are optimistic this time is different. New rockets are being developed to take passengers into space. Both Boeing Co. and SpaceX this year are due to fly astronauts into space

on new rockets. Other designs are on the drawing board promising to lower launch costs.

During a test flight in February, Virgin Galactic carried a third crew member as a stepping stone to flying passengers. For space tourism, “the market has been there for a long time. It is now the technology that is catching up,” George Whitesides, Virgin Galactic’s chief executive. He is coy about when customer flights would start. “We are getting close,” he said, though a few more test flights are planned.

Axiom Space Inc., run by former NASA ISS program manager Mike Suffredini, is hoping to take its first private astronauts to the station late next year. Axiom is also working on its own space station that could go aloft around 2023 or 2024.

Tourists could provide the principal revenue in the early days, Mr. Suffredini says, though the business could shift to government or commercial uses once the ISS is decommissioned, likely between 2024 and 2030.

One issue the space enterprises agree on is that for the price space tourists are willing to pay, they will get a unique experience. Training programs will be tailor-made, and could include rides in jets or centrifuges. On-orbit activities also will be bespoke.

What the customers will have in common is being able to call themselves astronauts. That, Mr. Whitesides said, “is like joining the most exclusive club in the world.”

—Andy Pasztor contributed to this article.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Blue Origin is planning to offer 11-minute flights on its New Shepard capsule. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said the company was already taking reservations. (4/11/2019) Bigelow aims to put space tourists into space around 2021. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated it was 2025. (4/12/2019)

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