BAIKONUR (KAZAKHSTAN) - To be a space tourist, it takes a lot of spare change - and it may also help to have a billionaire dad.

Two weeks ago, Oliver Daemen, 18, the son of a Dutch financial guru, snagged a ride on the inaugural flight of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin.

Daddy had generously gifted the seat to his son after an earlier candidate, who had bid US$28 million (S$38 million), backed out.

Though the 11-minute flight took the four passengers into space only by a whisker, it still marked a brave new frontier of space tourism.

And, just nine days earlier, another inaugural space flight by flamboyant billionaire Richard Branson on his Virgin Galactica also lifted off.

For those grounded to Earth with a more modest bank account, fret not. Space tourism is still within reach with a no-frills bucket-list option at a Russian spaceport in Kazakhstan.

Spending a day at the world's largest spaceport, the Baikonur Cosmodrome, starts from a more down-to-earth €500 (S$800).

You will get up close with cosmonauts and ask them if they have butterflies in their stomach like any mortal.

Then watch a monstrous rocket rolling out as though from a James Bond movie set - and feel the ground tremble as the rocket blasts into the heavens.

Welcome to little Baikonur in vast Central Asia. In the inhospitable desert steppes of Kazakhstan sits the massive Baikonur Cosmodrome, which is 10 times the size of Singapore at 6,700 sq km.

Before the pandemic, in July 2019, I visited this high-security zone, which is leased to the Russian space agency Roscosmos.

Grim-faced military personnel guard the dusty access road in and out of the spaceport. And all our security passes were vetted by the intelligence services in Moscow.

All applications have to be made at least 45 days in advance to allow the agencies to do their background checks on visitors.

A few positive vibes in your social media account about space travel and Mother Russia will help.

Even its nearby town- Baikonur, where the local Kazakhs provide support services - is monitored tightly. Travellers feel as though Big Brother is watching.

While the Cosmodrome's vast area is largely unfenced, do not attempt to sneak in - even James Bond will probably get lost in the desert.

Strange-looking communication devices, many as large as buildings, dot the barren landscape. Some resemble giant fly swatters. My favourite unearthly structures look like oversized hair curling tongs, good enough to groom King Kong.

"The harsh conditions make better communications," says my matronly guide, who drinks vodka during lunch. But, during my five-day stay in the spaceport, my mobile signals are non-existent - deliberately jammed, I suspect.

Strangely, the Russian army-owned hotel where I stay has Wi-Fi, though it sputters at a snail's pace - an ironic contrast to the vaunted space flights here, which symbolise the pinnacle of technology.

Baikonur Cosmodrome started life as a secretive, ballistic missile test site in the mid-1950s, but quickly evolved into the hub for the former Soviet Union's orbital race against America.

The first human was sent into space here.

Today, it is still the world's largest spaceport and half a dozen flights are launched every year, both with crewed and unmanned flights carrying payloads.

The spaceport is the main link between Earth and the International Space Station (ISS) - with astronauts from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) in the United States, European Space Agency, Japan, South America and even Malaysia hitching a ride on the reliable Soyuz rocket. Last year, Nasa - which now has the option of using Mr Elon Musk's SpaceX - signed a deal with Roscosmos for a US$91 million seat to the ISS.

Action movie set

A showstopper is when the MS-13 Soyuz rocket, its body as long as a 13-storey building is tall, lumbers out from its massive hangar, lying on top of a railcar. Warning alarms, creaks and clunks complete its dramatic entry. Standing just metres away, I am tempted to pat it for good luck. The "Remove Before Flight" red ribbons, flapping on the rocket, look easy to yank off.

Some two hours later at the launchpad, the rocket is hydraulically coaxed upright, with pylons of mechanical arms and neck clamps gripping the spacecraft as if to prevent it from flying off prematurely - this is one of many Instagram gems.

A priest appears to give his blessings while curious tourists, dignitaries, technical crew and media swarm the site, seeking photos. The only things missing are popcorn machines and beer stands to complete the boisterous carnival vibe.

Astronauts are not mere mortals. Like Olympians, they go faster, higher, stronger. Given a choice, I would rather dine with a spaceman than a movie star.

Earlier, at the pre-flight press conference for the MS-13 Soyuz launch I attended, Italian cosmonaut Luca Parmitano cracked jokes while Russian flight commander Aleksandr Skvortsov looked absolutely cool with his aura of experience. Nasa's Andrew Morgan completed the three-man crew for the flight to the ISS.

There was also a full back-up crew, helmed by a Russian, an American and a Japanese.

On the launch day, the cosmonauts in spacesuits and helmets march together. They bravely wave goodbye to their loved ones and the adoring crowd, displaying no signs of trepidation.

The same priest appears, this time deep in prayer.

The crew are whisked to their rocket and we scramble to a safe viewing point. We drink warm beer as officials pore over the latest weather readouts.

After an agonising three-hour wait, right on cue, the countdown starts. The rocket roars to life and its orange flames turn the night skies into day.

The ground trembles and a shiver runs down my spine just thinking about what the human race is capable of achieving. Within a minute, the rocket becomes a speck of orange as darkness envelopes it.

I cannot imagine what goes through the cosmonauts' minds. Nothing is 100 per cent foolproof on a space expedition.

"I start clapping only after the capsule is locked and engaged with the ISS,'' says an official from Roscosmos when I congratulate the team after the rocket's flawless lift-off.

Space shuttle, orange suits and an oversized tin can

On days between the rocket's final check and the launch day, we are treated to space paraphernalia with visits to space museums, decommissioned launchpads and memorials.

Used spacesuits, first-generation helmets and earlier versions of actual space capsules are scattered like autographed footballs.

The cramped conditions of the earlier capsules are mind-boggling - cattle-class travel in an oversized high-tech oil drum. Two persons squeezed into the space of four bathtubs in a Houdini act.

Left to our own devices, visitors like me slide into the pilot and co-pilot seats of the mothballed Buran Orbiter - the Soviet version of a space shuttle - and are stumped by the maze-like buttons and switches of the spacecraft.

Nearby, the memorial of the Nedelin disaster, a launchpad explosion that claimed more than a hundred lives, is a sobering reminder of the perils of space endeavours.

Nyet, da, spasibo, za zda-ro-vye

I feel short-changed at first when the travel agency's promised English-speaking guide turns out to be a local schoolteacher whose commentary is lost in translation.

But I do not blame her: Twirl together the explanations of liquid fuel boosters or elliptical calculations, throw in physics and the only result is linguistics gymnastics.

But, by the end of the first day, my Russian vocabulary has expanded to four words: nyet ("no"), da ("yes"), spasibo ("thank you") and za zda-ro-vye ("to your health" or "bottoms up"), in ascending order of importance. Those words are handy with my Russian co-travellers, who drink vodka like milk.

Every night after dinner, we dutifully troop out to the hotel's grounds to try to identify some constellations. Craning our necks to spot meteor showers, we never let go of our vodka glasses.

Other options for space junkies

Trust the Russians to come up with brilliant schemes to milk their military and technological hardware.

In another space escapade, you can fly on a monstrous air-freighter IL-76MDK for zero-gravity experiences. The four-engine jet plane, nicknamed the Flying Laboratory, trains astronauts for space flights. A 1 ½-hour flight, with a three-day Moscow tour package, costs €6,800 (more details available at this website).

For a rush of adrenaline, hardcore flight junkies can sign up for a fighter jet experience on board a Soviet-era MiG-19.

Fly at the speed of sound and get up to 17km above the planet's surface - commercial flights cruise at 10km. It is so high up that you can confirm that our planet is not a square.

If you hold your breakfast well and if the anti-gravity suit works, the pilot will show off combat manoeuvres, rolls and loops. The 45-minute flight costs €17,500 (more details at this website).

For the ultimate Christmas toy, part with US$5 million to buy a "gently used" MiG-19 refurbished fighter jet through United States plane broker Raptor Aviation - batteries and pilot not included.

Already, there is talk that within the next two years, space tourists may stay for up to a week in the ISS. Observers expect the price of sub-orbital flights to hover closer to US$150,000 to US$250,000 in the future.

Meanwhile, I buy hope and continue to see how my monthly lottery tickets pan out.

John Tan swears off luxury goods and takes the subway or bus. But he splurges on travel experiences and a never-ending bucket list.

Travel tips

Rocket tours

Two Moscow-based companies dominate the space tours at the Russian-leased Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

Vegitel offers superior accommodation within Baikonur town, but it means more daily travel back and forth as the activities are held mostly in the Cosmodrome, 45 minutes away.

In addition, its tour package costs almost €1,000 more than that of adventure specialist Best Russian Tour, which uses the newly refurbished army-owned hotel in the spaceport.

I used Best Russian Tour and found the company helpful, with good value.

Size matters, so book with larger companies with track records and connections, as the Russian space authorities reject some tour applications.

A typical five-day tour starts from €4,200. There is also a no-frills one-day tour that is limited to the rocket blast-off, starting from €500. Go for the full five-day tour.

Covid-19 and planning

Due to the pandemic, space tours have been suspended and are expected to resume from next year.

Launch schedules are available in advance. And, with the security clearance required, it is necessary to plan months ahead.

Avoid the cold, bitter winters and aim for spring or autumn. My trip in mid-July was very hot and dry, but the summer was short.

Kazakhstan travel

The country is definitely worth a post-vaccine visit as part of the space tour. Its capital city Nur Sultan is dotted with grandiose buildings, some of which are funky in style. The capital itself is master-planned along the lines of massive new urban centres in China.

The older Silk-Route tree-lined city of Almaty is the country's cultural hotbed and offers a delightful insight into Central Asia.

Getting there

For rocket tours in Baikonur Cosmodrome, tour agencies will charter flights from Moscow in Russia to the airport of Kyzylorda in Kazakhstan. This is followed by a bone-rattling 256km transfer to the town of Baikonur, where the spaceport is sited.

For my own trip, I decided to fly from Singapore to Istanbul in Turkey, as I had already visited Moscow several times.

From Istanbul, I flew onward to Nur Sultan to rekindle my love affair with its national dish Beshbarmak, a communal platter of boiled meat mixed with noodles and chyk, an onion sauce.

From Nur Sultan, it was a 11/2-hour domestic flight from Nur Sultan to Kyzylorda - a steal at $45.

After the space tour, I took another $40 flight to Kazakhstan's charming city of Almaty. Opting not to travel via Russia, I sliced almost €1,500 off the cost of my five-day space tour.