



Fly me to the moon: space hotel sees 2012 opening

By Pascale Harter

BARCELONA, Aug 10 (Reuters Life!) - "Galactic Suite", the first hotel planned in space, expects to open for business in 2012 and would allow guests to travel around the world in 80 minutes.

Its Barcelona-based architects say the space hotel will be the most expensive in the galaxy, costing \$4 million for a three-day stay.

During that time guests would see the sun rise 15 times a day and use Velcro suits to crawl around their pod rooms by sticking themselves to the walls like Spiderman.

Company director Xavier Claramunt says the three-bedroom boutique hotel's joined up pod structure, which makes it look like a model of molecules, was dictated by the fact that each pod room had to fit inside a rocket to be taken into space.

"It's the bathrooms in zero gravity that are the biggest challenge," says Claramunt. "How to accommodate the more intimate activities of the guests is not easy."

But they may have solved the issue of how to take a shower in weightlessness -- the guests will enter a spa room in which bubbles of water will float around.

When guests are not admiring the view from their portholes they will take part in scientific experiments on space travel.

Galactic Suite began as a hobby for former aerospace engineer Claramunt, until a space enthusiast decided to make the science fiction fantasy a reality by fronting most of the \$3 billion needed to build the hotel.

An American company intent on colonizing Mars, which sees Galaxy Suite as a first step, has since come on board, and private investors from Japan, the United States and the United Arab Emirates are in talks.

Plenty rich enough

If Claramunt is secretive about the identity of his generous backer, he is more forthcoming about the custom he can expect.

"We have calculated that there are 40,000 people in the world who could afford to stay at the hotel. Whether they will want to spend money on going into space, we just don't know."

Four million dollars might be a lot to spend on a holiday, but those in the nascent space tourism industry say hoteliers have been slow on the uptake because no one thought the cost of space travel would come down as quickly as it has.

Galactic Suite said the price included not only three nights in space. Guests also get eight weeks of intensive training at a James Bond-style space camp on a tropical island.

"There is fear associated with going into space," said Claramunt. "That's why the shuttle rocket will remain fixed to the space hotel for the duration of the guests' stay, so they know they can get home again."

In an era of concern over climate change, Galaxy Suite have no plans so far to offset the pollution implications of sending a rocket to carry just six guests at a time into space.

"But," says Claramunt, "I'm hopeful that the impact of seeing the earth from a distance will stimulate the guests' urge to value and protect our planet."