

Commercial Space Travel: To Infinity and Beyond, For a Price

The screenshot shows the Afro website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with categories like NEWS, SPORTS, ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT, OPINION, LOCAL, BUSINESS, MULTIMEDIA, SEARCH, JOBS, and CHARITIES. Below this is a search bar and a 'Register' link. The main content area features the article title 'Commercial Space Travel: To Infinity and Beyond, For a Price' by Alexis Taylor. The article includes an image of two Virgin Galactic White Knight 2 aircraft in flight. To the right of the image are several paragraphs of text describing the experience of space travel. Below the article is a 'Comments' section and a 'AFRO Black History' section. On the right side of the page, there are several advertisements, including one for AOL with the text 'THE LATEST NEWS, VIDEOS, & MORE' and another for Groupon with the text 'SHOPPING ONLINE* Hasta un 70% menos*'. The website also has a 'AFRO Poll Question' section at the bottom right.

Imagine out of a tiny porthole in one glance being able to see the continents of Africa, Europe, and North America--at the same time.

Imagine being able to cover your eye's view of the planet Earth with one finger.

Imagine being able to see the sun rise 15 times in one day, while completely circling the globe every 80 minutes.

Well, for all those who have been patiently praying to soar through the solar system, 2012 might bring an end to the wait with the first flights for tourists to the International Space Station (ISS).

Going for an easy \$200,000 a seat, Virgin Galactic, the same company that provides mobile phone service to millions, has already booked over 450 guests who have paid in full to explore the lower portions of the galaxy.

Seats on the SpaceShipTwo and WhiteKnightTwo can be reserved directly with Virgin Galactic, or with the help of any of the 28 certified space travel agencies in North America.

But Virgin Galactic isn't the only company looking to give average citizens a tour of outer space, which technically begins 62 miles above sea level.

Companies such as Boeing, Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX), and Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's Stratolaunch Systems, are all committed to commercial space travel.

While no official date has been set for the first tourist flight to space, SpaceX and Virgin Galactic have made test flights to space, and are in the final stages of safety reviews. To date, seven civilian non-scientists have visited the suborbital space, all of them, such as American Microsoft software developer Charles Simonyi, paying \$20 million dollars to catch flights on Russian crafts.

"When America landed on the Moon, I believe we made a promise and gave people a dream," said Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX, in testimony before the Senate advocating commercial space travel. "It seemed then that, given the normal course of technological evolution, someone who was not a billionaire, not an astronaut made of 'The Right Stuff,' but just a normal person, might one day see Earth from space."

Virgin Galactic plans to offer one-day space trips at the end of three days of training at Spaceport America, the Sierra County, N.M.-based complex recently dedicated as the world's first spaceport for commercial space travel.

But the intrepid traveler who wants a weekend in space may someday be able to consider booking space at the Galactic Suite Space Resort, the brainchild of Spanish architect Xavier Claramunt.

His vision is to offer a vacation package that, after eight weeks of training, a three-night stay in a three-room suite contained in a pod parked in orbit 300 miles above Earth for a cool \$4.4 million.

The hotel's planning and future construction is to be funded in part by the Foundation for Space and Lunar Exploration (FEEL), which describes itself as a "private non-profit organization created to support the technological and industrial development" in Spain's aerospace industry

Claramunt won't identify other investors, but claims that the project, costing a total of \$3 billion, has already secured backers who share his vision and enthusiasm for the prospects of the commercialization of space.

While exploring outer space may seem like the ultimate adventure, tourists are screened for mental and physical fitness before breaking through the atmosphere. Companies are required by law to disclose the down side of the journey including the fact that all trips to space carry the risk of fatality.

To keep tourists safe from radiation, space hotels, as well as and space lines taking tourists for a trip to the stars will have shields installed to block radiation poisoning, with maximum exposure to the elements in outer space not exceeding 10 weeks.

The National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) cleared the way to commercial space travel in large part when it contracted with private firms for missions to the ISS through the Commercial Orbital Transportation Services (COTS) program. SpaceX, with an \$850 million investment to haul cargo to the ISS and the training and development of commercial flight crews, on Feb. 7 will become the first commercial spaceline to actually dock to the ISS.

"Its a very exciting launch and its our first step in turning over the keys to provide supplies to the space station." said Michael Braukus, of NASA's Department of Human Exploration and Operations Mission."This frees NASA to explore deep space missions."

So, it's not a stretch to imagine a day when a moon bounce is no longer just an inflatable backyard amusement.