

JUST OUT

OF



THIS

WORLD

A FAMILIAR FIGURE WITH A TRUE SENSE OF ADVENTURE IS MAKING
COMMERCIAL SPACE TRAVEL A REALITY

BY CHRISTINA BEISCHL

FASCINATION WITH SPACE

is hardly a new phenomenon. The unexplored mysteries of the skies have hounded mankind since the dawn of time. Myths, legends and theories have evolved and debates have caused even the greatest historic thinkers headaches. And still today we are far from having unveiled the secrets of the universe ... the obsession continues.

Science fiction defines a huge financial segment of the film and publishing industries and the trend goes even further: adrenaline junkies and avid adventurers can now embark on trips to space themselves. Few have done it, as available programmes are limited; but one man is about to change this. It comes as no surprise that the pioneer is Sir Richard Branson, who, following his childhood dream, is introducing the first commercial space line, Virgin Galactic. The first flights are planned for the end of this year, with the man himself and his children on board – with nearly 600 people already having signed up to become astronauts.

“This will be the first time that private individuals in any meaningful numbers have experienced the wonder of space for themselves. We think that life-changing experience will be translated into a powerful inspiration to others and a force for good,” Virgin Galactic’s commercial director, Stephen Attenborough, says.

Similar to last century’s space race, competition to push people beyond Earth’s boundaries is fierce. What really sets Virgin Galactic apart, though, is a unique business model that has already proved commercially successful. Virgin Galactic is privately funded and develops, builds, tests and engineers its own fleet at New Mexico’s Space Port America, the world’s first purpose-built commercial spaceport. The impressive fleet currently includes *SpaceShipOne*, 60ft-

long *SpaceShipTwo*, which fits six passengers and two pilots, the *WhiteKnightTwo*, *Virgin Mothership Eve*, as well as *LauncherOne*, which will carry not just humans but satellites into orbit.

“*SpaceShipOne* was an incredibly good design – a classic and proven fit-for-purpose vehicle. Air-launch, feathered re-entry, low-risk propulsion, carbon composite construction and reusability all add up to a unique package that pointed to both safety and commercial viability,” Attenborough explains. “Alternative vehicles, by definition, need to be as good or better in these respects to compete for development, funding and market share. At the moment we would argue that a genuinely competitive design to *SpaceShipOne* and *Two* has yet to emerge.”

It also helps that the people involved are among the most experienced in the industry. Mike Moses, vice-president of operations, for example, was chair of Nasa’s Mission Management Team. He provided ultimate launch decision authority for the final 12 missions of the Space Shuttle Program, directly overseeing the safe and successful flights of 75 astronauts, further reassuring future space travellers that Virgin Galactic’s got what it takes.

And yet, the journey starts long before the trip to space. Once the reservation has been confirmed future astronauts will start training at various outlets throughout the US, including Virgin Galactic’s centrifuge facility in Philadelphia. They will get the opportunity to participate in many events, including travelling to New Mexico to see the spaceships being built or joining Sir Richard Branson at one of his private hideaways around the world. As part of the Virgin Galactic community, one thing is for sure: you are about to commence on the most thrilling voyage of your life. *US\$200,000 per seat*; virgingalactic.com ●

THE OTHER NAMES TO KEEP AN EYE ON IN THE RACE FOR SPACE:



Xcor Aerospace

For US\$95,000 per flight, medical screening and G-force training travellers will get the opportunity to board Xcor’s *Lynx* (above) space vehicle for a 30-minute suborbital flight to 100km. xcor.com

Space Adventures

Space Adventures offers various space travel options, some of which take clients up to space for multiple months. The company prides itself on currently being the only firm sending privately funded explorers to space. spaceadventures.com

Uniktour

Canadian Uniktour’s packages start from US\$95,000 with various entertainment add-ons including optional training missions and weightless flight. The first basic programme is said to launch this year. uniktourspace.com

Adventure Travel Company

As the name promises, the operator is a specialist in all sorts of adventure tours and has now added space travel to its portfolio. The experience starts at US\$136,000. atcspace.com

