

PROPOSED 2021 FLIGHT AROUND VENUS RECEIVES A MIXED RESPONSE



Dennis Tito is best known as the first 'space tourist' but now he is trying to give somebody else the chance to go on a trip through space; to be precise, he wants to send a married couple on a 582-day flight around Mars and Venus in 2021. It is unclear why he is looking for a married couple but what is known is that the original proposition was simply for a 501-day voyage around Mars in 2018 until a number of factors altered this estimate and allowed for the

addition of this second planet. The idea was put forward in front of experts at Congress's Committee of Science and there were some surprising responses.

The majority of speakers at the committee indicated their strong, slightly biased, belief in the project, while others were less convinced.

The response from a number of American speakers was promising but the problem is that the support they gave to Tito's unusual scheme is, arguably, based upon other agendas; the enthusiasm expressed by some backers has emerged from the fact that it offers a chance to criticise the Obama administration and NASA's current situation, rather than the concept itself. There is a belief that US astronautics is dying, with many criticising the decision to cancel a proposed moon landing, and this fantastical idea of flying around Venus offers some sort of hope to those desperate to see America on top when it comes to space exploration.

The way that this mission is being spoken about is a little strange. One of the arguments for the voyage taking place in 2021 is that the two planets will be closer together, in a rare occurrence, and this will save on fuel. It is a valid point, but it seems odd to be talking about these sort of conveniences as if they were planning a road trip. In the end, there needed to be an alternative voice in this debate to offer some critique and realism and, interestingly, this was provided by Russian experts. The Editor-in-Chief of a Russian magazine, that translates as "Issues of Cosmonautics", was quick to point out that there were no NASA representatives airing their opinions at Tito's project hearing and Alexander Zheleznyakov from the Russian Academy of Cosmonautics questioned NASA's interest in using their new spacecraft on this weird, risky adventure.

Could a married couple really fly around Mars and Venus in 2021?

NASA's level of involvement is Tito's biggest obstacle: he needs their expertise and their spacecraft if he is to send anyone to these planets - which is the other reason why he decided to postpone the trip from 2018 to 2021, the estimated year of completion for their Oriona spaceship - and he also needs their cash. Currently, \$300 million of the estimated \$1 billion budget is being funded by Tito's own source and he is looking towards NASA for the rest. Whether or not NASA will offer their own support to the initiative in the future remains to be seen but, for now, Tito can hold onto the questionable optimism of Congress and the hope that married couples will be interested in the concept.

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