

SPACE TOURISM IN EUROPE COULD BE CLOSER TO REALITY



Space tourism is on the rise as the potential for space flights is further explored by the UK government and by Virgin Galactic, a company that is already working on having its first commercial space flight available for launch as soon as the end of the year. It is hoped that the creation of a British spaceport will help the country continue to ride the wave of prestige brought on by the 2012

Olympics and there are a lot of wealthy travellers and space-lovers anticipating the chance to reach their dream destination.

Space tourism is becoming more of a reality but it is still being targeted at a more wealthy clientèle.

The chance to ride above the Earth's atmosphere in zero-gravity is becoming more and more accessible as Virgin Galactic builds upon its status and potential. The company has now been granted the same International Civil Aviation Organisation tag as its commercial airlines, which means they can sell tickets via travel agencies as an airline would and it is already possible to go on a zero-gravity flight. These voyages can only offer the simulation of space travel with 30 second zero-gravity intervals but as they become more popular and prevalent, the desire for the real thing just grows. The only problem with this increased desire for space flights is that they are still just a option for a handful of travellers that can afford the astronomical costs and have the dedication to go through the mandatory 3-4 day training session. A current zero-gravity flight within our atmosphere costs \$5000 per person; the flights into space from Las Cruces, New Mexico, are priced at \$120,000 per person. While there no LCC equivalents being planned for less wealthy space fans, experts believe that these costs will drop significantly as the flights become more commonplace.

Affordable or not, the UK is keen to be at the forefront of space tourism and other European nations are on their tail.

The UK government is keen to attract companies like Virgin Galactic to a specially created spaceport in the country but there could be some problems in choosing the best location. Firstly, there are certain criteria that need to be met such as the ability to create long runways for the spacecraft, a rural setting and a favourable climate. On top of this, following on from this idea of space tourism being a high-end venture, there will also need to be high-class facilities fairly close by to appeal to this breed of traveller. At the US spaceport in New Mexico, Virgin Galactic have partnered with Hotel Encanto and World Class Gourmet to provide the perfect experience for tourists just sixty miles from the site of the launch. The other potential problem is that while there are eight locations currently being considered, six of these are in Scotland, a nation that may soon leave the UK depending on the result of the referendum on independence.

At the moment, Virgin Galactic do not have an International Air Transport Association code to allow them to bring flights to a spaceport in Europe but it is believed that this will not be far away and European space tourism, whether in the UK or in one of the other nations keen on developing commercial space travel such as Sweden or Switzerland, will become a more common and accessible option.

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