

SPACE TOURISTS, WELCOME ON BOARD



Twenty years ago the idea of an average man orbiting the Earth seemed utterly nonsensical. Then, in 2001, the first space excursion took place. Dennis Tito was the first one to pay for his trip to space, followed by Mark Shuttleworth, Gregory Olsen and Anousheh Ansari.

At present, Charles Simonyi, a billionaire software engineer is getting ready to visit the International Space Station in March next year. Simonyi belongs to a group of people who are not only interested in space travel but are also willing to provide funds in order to enable more and more people to experience the amazing adventure of visiting the space.

Many entrepreneurs see this area of tourism as attractive investment opportunity. In October, the International Symposium for Personal Spaceflight was held in Las Cruces, New Mexico. What everyone longed to hear was the answer to a key question: When will the market prove that investors can actually make money on space tourism?

Peter Diamandis (the founder of a company offering airplane flights simulating weightlessness) estimated that time will come in 3 to 5 years. "I think you'll see the first commercial flights in '08, two or three vehicles by '09. In think in 2012, you'll see real profits," he said.

There are yet a few problems to overcome. Canadian-based Da Vinci Project or British Starchaser Industries have been trying to develop a more suitable space rocket. At the moment, the costs of one space trip reach \$20-25 million. Alex Tai of the British-based Virgin Galactic said his company has a list of 65,000 "would-be fliers" who have already paid to reserve their seats. The company plans to provide the passenger space flights service as soon as 2009.

There is no limit to the imagination of wealthy entrepreneurs eager to invest in space tourism; Tai mentioned that Virgin would like to get into space hotel business as well. Moreover, the Russian

federal Space Agency has recently presented a new thrill luring more wealthy entrepreneurs: a space walk while orbiting 400 km above Earth; the price is \$35 million.

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