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Right: SpaceShipOne, the first privately funded rocket plane, made its historic debut on June 21, 2004.

Below: Virgin Galactic's fare of \$200,000 will skyrocket passengers 62 miles above the Earth.



Let's Do Launch

Space travel for the rest of us becomes a reality BY ERIC HISS

Titanium-level travelers who continually seek out the ultimate experience have new terrain to explore. No, it's not the latest luxe tented safari camp or heliskiing peak. The ultimate road trip isn't even constrained by the Earth's gravity. Thanks to some enterprising engineers and farsighted investors and

entrepreneurs, space is now officially the final frontier.

Space tourism went from science fiction to business plan on a beautifully clear day in the California desert last October. On that day, pilot Brian Binnie soared both into the blue yonder and record books in a craft called SpaceShipOne to claim the Ansari X-Prize. The \$10 million prize was modeled after the challenges devised early in aviation history to spur the likes of Charles Lindbergh to new heights, and awarded to the first group to travel 100 km into space twice in a two-week period. Designed by aeronautical guru Burt Rutan and backed by Paul Allen, SpaceShipOne (which flies with a support craft, the White Knight) earned the

prize by being the first privately manned spacecraft to exceed an altitude of 62 miles twice within a 14-day period.

The successful flight of SpaceShipOne marks an auspicious beginning for commercial space travel, but don't pack your bags yet. Suborbital flights that similar craft will enable are still a few years off.

Nonetheless, the sums and stakes involved are astronomical. One of the most prominent figures is Sir Richard Branson, who is now aggressively positioning his newest project, Virgin Galactic, as the world's first commercial space tourism operator. To that end, Virgin Galactic recently agreed to license Rutan's designs in a deal that could be worth as much as \$22 million, depending on the size of the fleet Branson builds.

"We are going to develop and certify a large White Knight and SpaceShip for Virgin Galactic, much bigger than



ABOVE: JIM CAMPBELL/AERO NEWS NETWORK; BELOW: MIKE MASSEE



COURTESY SPACE ADVENTURES

the one flown last summer," says Rutan. Virgin Galactic plans to launch the service in 2007, with fares running approximately \$200,000. That buys aspiring astronauts the chance to experience weightlessness and views of the curvature of the Earth framed by the indelible darkness of space from 62 miles above the interstate. "The passages we are looking at will include a one-hour climb, a two-minute wild climb, then five minutes of weightlessness with a real black sky view," Rutan says.

What space travelers can expect inside these new commercial vessels is still the subject of guarded speculation and a little competitive hedging, but Rutan assures it will be a totally new paradigm of seating configurations. "You must have lots of room and be able to float about the cabin," he observes. "Being strapped in will not adequately support the experience."

Instead of seat belts, Rutan explains, passengers will have a hinged bar, much like the ones found on roller coasters, to permit zero-gravity gamboling at appropriate times, and individual panoramic windows.

Another substantial player in space tourism, Arlington, Va.-based Space Adventures, offers a selection of tours that lets you pick your propulsion. From spaceflight training simulations to full orbital missions that circle the Earth

more than 100 times, the sky is the limit. Space tourism outfits such as Space Adventures and Incredible Adventures of Sarasota, Fla., use facilities around the world, including Zhukovsky Airbase on the outskirts of Moscow and Florida's Kennedy Space Center, to give clients a full menu of options.

Space Adventures still owns the benchmark achievement in the category. "To date, we're still the only company to have actually taken tourists to space," clarifies Eric Anderson, the company's CEO. Among its high fliers are Dennis Tito and the aptly named Mark Shuttleworth, who each paid \$20 million to hitch a ride to the International Space Station. Space Adventures has also sold well over 100 suborbital flights, so the line to get onboard vessels not yet built is already forming.

Anderson says his typical clients spend around \$200,000 per year on travel. "They are risk takers, adventurous types." For those serious about travel to the outer limits, the top space travel providers will offer the latest information on all the various facets of the business at the first Space Tourism Summit scheduled for May 25 and 26 at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C.

The core business for these companies right now (and the true opportunity

for space adventurers) is in jet fighter rides and zero-gravity parabolic flights, more colorfully known as "vomit comets." Jet fighter rides are typically about an hour long and involve reaching altitudes of approximately 70,000 feet in military jets like the MIG-25 Foxbat. Participants can expect to pay about \$6,000 to experience serious *g* forces as they travel two-and-a-half times the speed of sound. Parabolic flights take place in aircraft like a modified Boeing 727-200 or an Ilyushin 76, a large military transport airplane similar to a C-130.

Do not expect any onboard amenities on these adrenaline-laced joyrides. In the case of the Ilyushin, interiors are stark and Spartan, as befits a Russian military aircraft. The only extra offered in the cavernous craft is padded flooring to protect passengers during weightlessness. A typical parabolic flight plan is a climb to about 35,000 feet; from there the plane indeed does a parabolic whoop-de-do, dropping to 25,000 feet. Passengers experience weightlessness for about 25 seconds during each of the approximately 15 parabolas the plane executes in the 90-minute flights.

For those not sure if they are up to it, consider that one passenger ready to go again is 80-year-old Dorothy Simpson, who traveled to Russia last year for the experience, a present from her husband. The flight put Simpson in the *Guinness World Book of Records* as the oldest woman to experience weightlessness. Part of the voyage included her being sailed like a human glider between two of her Russian handlers while weightless, which was followed by being turned like a pinwheel while suspended in midair. "You don't want to eat before you do this," the Seattle resident cautions, but she enthuses the trip was "absolutely unforgettable." 🍷

Space Adventures, 888.85.SPACE, www.spaceadventures.com; **SpaceShipOne**, Scaled Composites LLC, 661.824.4541, www.scaled.com; **Space Tourism Summit**, www.spacetourisminitiative.com; **Virgin Galactic**, www.virgingalactic.com