

Space to relax

Sky's no longer the limit as the rich can hop on a commercial flight to see a different view of the earth, writes Joanne Lam

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By [Joanne Lam](#)



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Virgin Galactic will take its space travellers into the air with the WhiteKnightTwo.



The Spaceport on Curaçao island is expected to become a major tourist attraction.



Rocket lovers will be fascinated by the space-age technology. Virgin Galactic has been feverishly testing its spacecrafts to ensure ultimate safety for passengers.



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This is not "science fiction", and it's not what a Hollywood blockbuster can conjure up. Nor is it a snapshot lifted from a science textbook. It is space travel.

Travelling to space "will be a life-changing experience", says Alex Tang, CEO of SXC Asia, one of a handful of companies looking to offer commercial space flights within the next couple of years.

"It will change our vision of the earth. Looking at the earth from above will allow travellers to see exactly how beautiful it really is. It will make them want to protect it," Tang says. "Space travel isn't science fiction anymore."

Space has always been a vast piece of real estate for many nations.

Remember the bad, old days of the cold war, when the race to space was a matter of national pride? The United States and the former Soviet Union locked horns in their attempts to boldly go where no man had gone before. The first man to break through the earth's atmosphere was late Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who in 1961 made an orbit around the earth aboard the Vostok 1 spacecraft.

Eight years later, Neil Armstrong became the first astronaut to land on the moon. He famously said: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Since then, we've made leaps and bounds in research and technology into travel, making space tourism a dream come true.

SXC Asia, part of the Amsterdam-headquartered Space Expedition Corporation (SXC), is the latest firm to join the "space race" following Virgin Atlantic's bold move to offer civilians a chance to reach for the stars.

It was six years ago that Richard Branson announced Virgin Galactic, the spaceship that will carry tourists to the heavens. SXC is one of the first space travel companies with a branch based in Asia.

There are two types of trips offered by SXC Asia: One journeying 100km into space (HK\$780,000) and another venturing 60km (HK\$700,000). From mid-2015, SXC hopes to take aspiring astronauts on a one-hour flight from the Caribbean island of Curaçao



Sir Richard Branson and his family will be aboard Virgin's first commercial flight into space.

into space. Then, travellers can experience zero gravity and enjoy the black calm of space for six minutes, before gravity starts pulling them back down.

If you are one of the company's lucky 100 passengers, or snag one of the 12 reserved spots from the Asian market to be part of the "founding astronauts" with SXC, a special package at HK\$1.68 million includes being part of a documentary, capturing the first commercial spaceflights launched by the Dutch company.

A cockpit experience makes SXC's programme special, Tang says.

"The co-pilot is more than just a passenger," he explains. "He or she will see all the work the pilot does, [down to each and every] button he pushes, and also enjoy a front-row view of earth and space from a four-square-metre canopy."

Essentially, the co-pilot is given a chance to be an astronaut, without the years of training. Passengers will receive some training and assimilation, however. Each co-pilot will be given a short "mission briefing" and a course on emergency procedures.

With additional costs, each space traveller can be taken to SXC's Dutch headquarters to experience special assimilation training, including "zero-g" and "high-g" training.

Branson's high-profile brainchild, Virgin Galactic, has drawn the attention of Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Leonardo DiCaprio and Justin Bieber. The celebrities were reported to have purchased flights with the company.

Virgin Galactic is proud to pioneer space travel, says the company's

commercial director, Stephen Attenborough. "We are lucky to be able to offer people the chance to achieve their lifetime dream," he says.

"We've been very pleased to see that so many people have signed up already. It is a great validation of what we are doing and the price we are charging."

For US\$250,000, each Virgin Galactic passenger can get to enjoy "astro-batics" and "zero-g fun" for several minutes in space, while overlooking views of the earth at approximately 1,600km in every direction. Then gravity will play its part and the rocket will descend.

The company also offers three days of pre-flight preparation, team-bonding and onsite training at Spaceport America. "Learning how to make the most of the time in microgravity and tips on how to be safe in macrogravity will form an important part of the preparation," Attenborough says.

Both space-tour companies also have health requirements, and each passenger will be screened for medical problems.

If you're not an adrenalin-junkie, and don't mind missing out on the internationally recognised astronaut title, Spanish company Zero2infinity is offering hi-tech balloon journeys - "bloon" experiences - where travellers can float gently for 36km into space and enjoy romantic sunrise views before a gentle descent back to earth.

Such excursions might not give you the buzz from a rocket launch into space, but its medical requirements are less stringent (if you can ride a commercial plane, you are good to go), and might be perfect if you are looking to truly admire and embrace your time in space.

Each bloon can fit up to six people, with room for four passengers, enabling travellers to go into space with friends and family.

Zero2infinity also focuses "on real, personalised custom-made voyages", says Annelie Schoenmaker, the company's external

relations and legal officer.

"From a private pod just for one person or a family, to a wedding, a charity event or a personalised interior design, anything is possible," she says, adding prices depend on the nature of each voyage.

Other customisations include privatising space for couples, bringing significant items on board, or enjoying a three-star Michelin meal.

Such trips might still sound like a far-fetched dream, but these companies are showing that the sky is no longer the limit. "In the same way that the early users of commercial aviation services aided the development of the commercial airline industry, pioneers will open up the space experience to a much wider group of people," Attenborough says.

And the only way to go is up. As technology develops over time, Tang hopes travellers may have the option to leave the spacecraft - but it will take time. "Safety is our key concern," he says. "We're at still our first stage of space travel, maybe by stage three or four, it will be a possibility."

COUNTDOWN TO MARS

For Dennis Tito, the world's first commercial space tourist, the space dream keeps growing. The American entrepreneur founded a non-profit organisation – Inspiration Mars – with the aim of launching a couple into a 501-day orbit to Mars and back in 2018. The couple will not actually land on Mars, however.

Meanwhile, the Mars One Foundation has proposed a reality TV show. The Dutch foundation is planning on sending contestants to settle on Mars in 2023. Participants will not return to earth. So far, more than 200,000 people have signed up for this one-way mission.



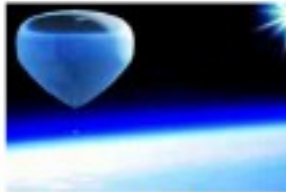
Is this science fiction? Only time will tell.

For more information:

SXC: www.spacexc.com

Virgin Galactic: www.virgingalactic.com

Zero2infinity: www.01100.com

	 VIRGIN GALACTIC	 SXC	 ZERO2INFINITY
COMPANY LAUNCH	2004	2008	2009
TEST FLIGHTS COMPLETED TO DATE (AS OF OCTOBER, 2013)	More than 100 successful test flights completed, including high-altitude and long-duration flights on various spacecraft	Scheduled to commence before the end of the year	Five balloons of different sizes, up to an altitude of 36km
PROPOSED FLIGHT SCHEDULE	Ultimately, to fly every day, subject to weather conditions. The company plans to send 500 people up in the first 18 months, and 30,000 people over 10 years.	Up to four a day, 365 days a year, subject to weather conditions	Trips up to twice a week, subject to weather conditions
SPECIAL FEATURES	Backed by Sir Richard Branson, this high-profile suborbital travel option already has A-listers, such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, registered as future customers.	A co-pilot experience allows passengers to see what goes on in the cockpit. The company will fly passengers to Curacao island in the Caribbean for a quick stay, before they jet off into space.	Panoramic windows allow passengers to take in the view during the gentle ascent while enjoying a meal in near-space. No stringent physical health requirements for passengers
PRICE	US\$250,000	HK\$700,000 to HK\$1.68 million	Depends on the customisation of the trip
PROPOSED LAUNCH DATE	To be determined, 2014	For 60km flights, mid- to late-2014; for 100km flights, mid- to late-2015	End of 2015

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