

Holiday with the Stars

By Wendy McCorry, Science Communicator

Tired of going to the same old holiday destinations? Fancy going somewhere a bit different? Got a few thousand pounds to spare? Then perhaps you might like to book a trip to space on Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic spaceline. At a cost of \$200,000 (about £105 000) per ticket, Virgin Galactic are offering a three day package including hotel accommodation (with meals and champagne thrown in); pre-flight training; transport to and from the Spaceport America launch site in New Mexico, as well as the 2.5 hour space flight. Of these 2.5 hours, only around seven minutes are actually spent in space, with approximately four minutes of zero-gravity, where passengers can release their seatbelts and float around the cabin. The spaceship will be fitted with numerous windows, offering views of thousands of kilometres in every direction, and allowing passengers to marvel at the sight of our Earth viewed from space.

You might think all this sounds like a far-off dream, but Branson hopes to begin his unusual package holidays as soon as 2009. He has teamed up with aerospace designer Burt Rutan to create The Spaceship Company, whose aim is to manufacture an entire fleet of commercial spaceships and launch aircraft. In June 2004, Rutan and his team flew the first privately funded human space flight on SpaceShipOne. In the same year they won the Ansari X Prize, a \$10 million reward offered to the first non-government organization launching a reusable manned spacecraft into space twice in two weeks. In 2005, with funding from Branson, work began on constructing SpaceShipTwo (a scaled-up version of SpaceShipOne), of which 5 will be built for commercial use by Virgin Galactic.

Unlike the Space Shuttle, SpaceShipTwo will be launched from the air rather than the ground. A launch aircraft named White Knight II will carry



Image Credit: Virgin Galactic

SpaceShip 2 Virgin Galactic's craft for space tourism looks like a science fiction toy but is a practical vehicle.

the spaceship, containing six passengers and two pilots, to a height of 15 km (50 000 feet). The spaceship will then detach and begin its climb, with the aid of rockets, to a height of 110 km (360 000 feet). Virgin Galactic claim that this method of launching is not only much safer than a ground launch, but is also kinder to the environment, as less fuel is required to launch the craft.

“Branson is planning to make one of the first flights himself”

Branson is planning to make one of the first flights himself, along with his parents and his children, in a bold effort to allay fears about safety. Numerous well-known figures have also reportedly booked their tickets. These include



White Knight I Virgin Galactic intends that an enlarged version of this aircraft, White Knight II, will carry a SpaceShipTwo into the stratosphere for launch. Effectively it is the first stage of a two-stage space launcher .

astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, Star Trek actor William Shatner and Hollywood director Bryan Singer.

But before you race out to buy your £105 000 ticket, it may be more prudent to wait, as Virgin executives have forecast that, once the industry

is underway, the price of seats is set to tumble. If you would prefer to stay in space a little longer than a few minutes, Virgin Galactic also have plans to create a space hotel with which future spaceships will be able to dock. Watch this space...