

American space tourist buys return ticket to orbit

March 23 2009, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



A Saturday, April 7, 2007 file photo taken from a broadcast on Russian RTR Russian Television Channel, Space tourist U.S. billionaire Charles Simonyi, left, is seen aboard the space craft before the launch of the Soyuz TMA-10 from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. Simoni will become the world's first two-time space tourist when he leaves Earth behind Thursday, March 26, 2009 and heads back to the space station. (AP Photo/RTR-Russian Television Channe, Filel)

(AP) -- Recession or no, billionaire Charles Simonyi couldn't pass up another shot at space, even if it meant shelling out \$35 million more.

Besides, it may one of the last times the Russian government allows tourists to hitch a ride to the international [space station](#).

"It's now or never," said Simonyi, who has now spent \$60 million for a

couple of space vacations. The first was \$25 million.

A computer genius who helped build Microsoft, Simonyi (sih-MOHN'-ee) will become the world's first two-time [space tourist](#) when he leaves Earth behind Thursday. He'll be accompanied by two professional astronauts - a Russian and American - who will be going up for a six-month stint at the space station.

His own trip will last under two weeks, and it will be his last.

"I'm not getting any younger," the 60-year-old told The Associated Press in a recent telephone interview. He'll be one of the older men to fly in space, though nowhere near John Glenn's record at age 77.

Besides, he's promised his new wife, Lisa Persdotter, a 28-year-old Swedish socialite, that this will be his final [spaceflight](#). He told her about his plans when they got engaged and "she was very supportive, but, BUT to a limit, mainly. Just once," Simonyi said with a chuckle. He's quick to point out this is his first marriage, and he's taking one of their engagement rings with him into orbit.

The Hungarian-born Simonyi, who lives in suburban Seattle, is among six rich people who have bought tickets to space through Virginia-based [Space Adventures](#).

NASA, the major stakeholder in the space station, may not love the idea of hosting tourists - "spaceflight participants" as it calls them. But the initial concerns back in 2001 have eased over the years with the addition of guidelines.

Space station program manager Mike Suffredini has spoken to Simonyi, just as he has with everyone going up, to make sure the visitor understands his limitations at the orbiting complex.

"It really has to do with their safety," as well as the safety of the others and the space station itself, Suffredini said. "They're extremely restricted" in what they can do on the American side.

All this may soon be moot: Russian space officials have indicated that after this year, there will be no more seats available to tourists. That's because the space station crew is about to double in size to six - hopefully by the end of May - and professional fliers will fill all the slots.

After he returned from his two-week space station trip in April 2007, Simonyi said Russian cosmonauts told him how different and rewarding it was to go back up a second time. With doors closing on future tourist flights, Simonyi did not want to miss out.

Because the training for his first flight was so recent, Simonyi got the abridged version, three months at cosmonaut headquarters in Star City, [Russia](#), versus six to eight months before. He will return to Earth on April 7 in a Soyuz capsule.

"I look at it as a continuation of the first flight," Simonyi said. "The reasons are the same. It's to support space research, it's to popularize civilian space flight and communicate the excitement of sciences and engineering to our kids."

Simonyi's own interest in space was kindled in childhood. He represented Hungary as a junior cosmonaut, when he was 13, and won a trip to Moscow to meet one of the first Soviet spacemen. His interest in computer programming eventually led him to the United States; he's been a U.S. citizen for 27 years.

Simonyi - who has a doctorate in computer science and is a licensed pilot - led the development of Microsoft Word and Excel. He left Microsoft

in 2002 and founded Intentional Software Corp. as well as the [Charles Simonyi](#) Fund for Arts and Sciences.

He's offered to do medical and radiation experiments while he's up there, and will use Windows on Earth software to photograph Earth. The view and the feeling of weightlessness are drawing him back as well.

"It's a super-wide screen, and the Earth is fantastic blue," he said.

His wife of four months will be at the launching site in Kazakhstan, along with about a dozen other family and friends. Microsoft Corp. co-founder Bill Gates, who was an usher at Simonyi's wedding, can't make it.

It's ironic, Simonyi said, that he left Hungary in 1966 as a teenager, frustrated by Soviet secrecy, and now Russia is allowing him to fulfill his dream - again.

"Who would have thought? The irony of this is amazing," he said.

On the Net:

Simonyi: <http://www.charlesinspace.com/>

Charles Simonyi Fund for Arts and Sciences:
<http://www.simonyifund.org/>

NASA: <http://www.nasa.gov/mission-pages/station/main/index.html>

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