

The end of the line for space tourism?

March 28 2009, by Amelie Herenstein

A US software mogul who made history this week as the first person to travel to space twice as a tourist could also be the last paying passenger to head into space for several years.

These are tough times in the niche industry of space tourism, and not only because the economic crisis means that fewer are willing to stump up the 35 million dollars that Charles Simonyi paid for his second trip to space.

The ambitions have also been hit by plans to double the crew on the [International Space Station](#) from three to six from May, meaning there will no longer be a spare seat for a tourist on future missions.

Simonyi's trip to space was the seventh by a [space tourist](#) since the programme was launched by Russia's space agency Roskosmos and US firm Space Adventures in 2001.

The joint venture between the two organisations had always seemed unlikely, with the young T-shirted employees from Space Adventures standing side-by-side with the grizzled aeronautics engineers from Roskosmos.

"There's nobody confirmed (to be the next space tourist) but things can change, it's an unpredictable situation," the CEO of Space Adventures, Eric Anderson, said at the launch site of the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

Roskosmos head Anatoly Perminov has said that Simyoni will be "the last or maybe penultimate tourist probably. For a while there'll be a break."

Interest has been expressed by the Russian-born founder of the search engine Google, Sergey Brin, who has put down a deposit for a future flight.

"He's not confirmed when he will fly but he's in line, we have several others we're talking to, we have people from all over the world, people who take the long view," said Anderson.

But dreams of opening space travel for general tourism remain in the realms of science fiction. All those who have gone into space as tourists have been super rich who have undergone months of training.

With Simonyi paying 15 million dollars more than the 20 million dollars forked out by the first space tourist Dennis Tito in 2001, it is inevitable that the economic crisis is hitting the industry.

"Every company is affected by the current economic climate. Of course we are affected," said Anderson.

But the main problem are developments in the space programme itself, with the ISS crew set to double and the United States to be wholly dependent on Russia for manned launches when the shuttle is taken out of service.

Space Adventures is already talking about renting a space capsule that could take two tourists into space along with a professional commander.

Anderson said an initial agreement has already been signed with Roskosmos and missions could start from 2012. The tourist missions

would help the space programme by bringing additional supplies to the ISS.

"We'd provide additional Soyuz missions... it's something that would be beneficial to the ISS," said Anderson.

Looking ahead, he said that partnerships other than with the Russian space agency were feasible, with China and India pressing ahead with their own space programmes.

"My belief is within a decade there will be five or six different ways to go to orbit," predicted Anderson.

"There'll be competition and there'll be a lot of people who will have the ability to fly in space. We're trying to work with all of them."

For Richard Garriott, a multi-millionaire computer game designer who flew to space in 2008 and now works for Space Adventures, the next decade will see a "privatization of space" as more outlets emerge offering space travel and the cost of tourism to the final frontier plunges.

"Now I think you're going to see a real renaissance of discovering the potential that space offers," he said.

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