

# 'First' Pakistan astronaut wants to make peace in space

October 26 2012, by Damon Wake

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Once you've been to both poles, skydived over Mount Everest and set up your country's first consulate in Monaco, the question is: what next?

For 37-year-old explorer Namira Salim the answer is easy—become the first Pakistani to go into [space](#).

Her flight with [Richard Branson](#)'s Virgin Galactic [space tourism](#) project is planned for next year. Although no date has been fixed for the venture's first commercial flight, she is looking forward to fulfilling a lifelong obsession.

"As a child I always believed I would go to space. It's not that I read about it one fine day and thought of signing up. I've always said this was in my DNA," she told AFP by Skype from Dubai.

"I must have been less than five years old and I was crying very hard. My father was trying to pacify me and I was like 'I don't want anything, I just want to go to space. I don't want any toys, nothing, just send me to space.'"

But coming from a country with no major space programme of its own, where millions live in poverty, the journey to the stars was never likely to be straightforward.

Pressured by her father to study, she kept up her passion for space in her spare time, joining astronomy clubs and spending nights gazing at the

desert skies after her family moved to the United Arab Emirates in the 1980s.

"I always had this feeling that there was something very spiritual and divine associated with this whole thing," she said of her ambition. "As if something was really pulling me there and calling out to me, and I had to be there and I belonged there."

Chasing your dreams doesn't always come cheap—Salim paid \$200,000 to sign up with Virgin Galactic in 2007, funded with support from her family, who run a heavy construction equipment firm in the UAE. The weightless component of the flight will last for only a few minutes.

The cost is high by any standard—but a fraction of the \$35 million US software pioneer Charles Simonyi paid for his 2007 trip to the [International Space Station](#)—and Salim insists it's about more than just fulfilling the whims of the rich.

— Investing in peace —

Salim said the money she has paid is an investment in a commercial industry that will one day replace government space agencies and enable researchers, satellites—and tourists—to go up at a fraction of the current cost.

And she believes space travel can eventually play a role in world peace.

"We hope one day politicians could be taken up in space, and a space shuttle like this one we've built with Virgin is perfect for that. We could actually have peace summits and have conflict resolution in space."

Her mission was big news in Pakistan at the time of her signing up for the trip, and when it finally does take place, the country's freewheeling

and patriotic media is likely to go into overdrive.

She has already made headlines. In 2007 she became the first Pakistani to go to the North Pole, in 2008 the first Pakistani to go to the South pole and later the same year the first South Asian—not just Pakistani—to skydive over Mount Everest.

Currently Pakistan's honorary consul in Monaco, Salim has taken her symbolic "Peace Flag" on all her trips and now plans to carry it into space.

In doing so she hopes to help tell a more positive story about her troubled homeland, which is wracked by Islamist and separatist insurgencies, poverty, disease, power shortages and economic stagnation.

"I think that raising a peace flag on behalf of the country, is what we need badly, more than anything," she said.

Training for the flight was done at the National Aerospace Training and Research Centre in the United States, and included a simulation on a centrifuge recreating the pressures and stresses of the journey to and from sub-orbital space.

"I felt the G-forces, which made me feel as if there was a big elephant crushing me down all the way—I couldn't even move and I was suffocated," she said.

"Then all of a sudden we broke the orbit and I was in space, the simulation profiles completely changed and I felt light as a feather, floating in space. It was a really liberating feeling."

More than 500 people have put down a deposit to clinch a seat on the 60-mile, two-hour ride into space. Branson has said he hopes the service

will make its first journey by the end of 2013.

The Federal Aviation Administration has given Virgin permission to start testing its SpaceShipTwo craft in space, but it is still unclear exactly when the first flights with tourists on board will take off.

But when they do, Salim will be there to make history for her country.

"I love my title 'first Pakistani astronaut', it's like being a very special princess of the country. Maybe nicer than being a princess," she said.

Salim, born in Karachi but now living in Monaco, said her family have always been supportive but would rather she was more conventional in her home life.

"I do have a very radical life, not having followed the typical path of being married with children, that is a worry for them, that is a wish. They do hope I'll settle down," she said.

"But I don't have any plans and I don't believe in any plans, I do believe in destiny and that gut feeling that I've always believed in and followed."

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