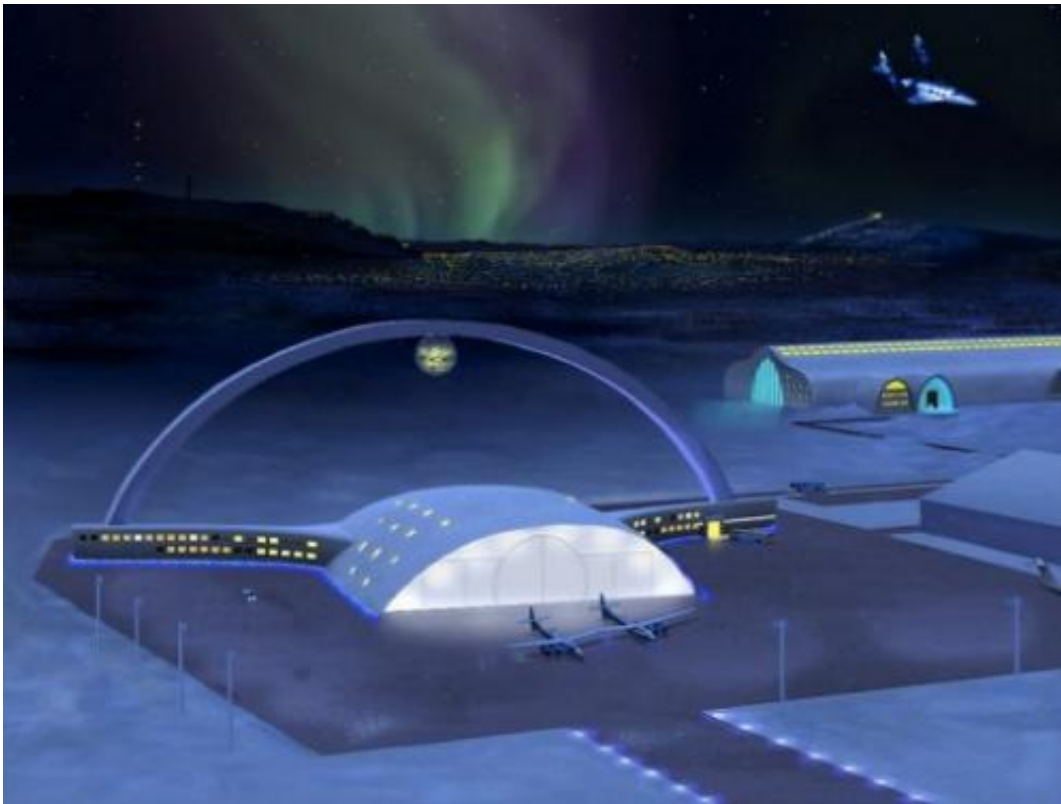


Arctic town eyes future as Europe's gateway to space

December 17 2012, by Camille Bas-Wohlert



This handout picture shows an artist's impression of an international space airport in Kiruna. Kiruna, the northernmost city in Sweden, hopes to develop space tourism in 10 years by building an international space airport like this one.

Sweden's small Arctic town of Kiruna has a surprisingly international airport with regular flights to London and Tokyo, but it has even bigger plans: to offer commercial space flights.

Spaceport Sweden, a company founded in 2007, hopes to be able to provide the first flights within a decade from Kiruna's airport.

"We're working on establishing [commercial flights](#) from Sweden to space for tourism and research, and to create a launching pad at the airport," explained the company's enthusiastic director, Karin Nilsson, seated in her office at the Swedish Institute of [Space Physics](#) (IRF).

The idea is that space tourists would take off for a maximum two-hour trip into space aboard futuristic spacecraft currently undergoing testing, which resemble a cross between an airplane and a [space shuttle](#) and which can carry between one and six passengers.



Rocket technicians of the SSC (Swedish Space Corporation) assemble the student rocket "Rexus 11" at the Esrange Space Centre near Kiruna on November 15, 2012. Kiruna has 60 years experience of space research to its credit. SSC and the rocket centre Esrange was founded in 1966.

The sub-orbital flights will send passengers 100 kilometres (60 miles) above Earth and allow them to experience five minutes of [weightlessness](#)

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Kiruna's location in the far north of Sweden, and Europe, makes it a prime location for space flights, Nilsson said.

The space flights would not be disturbed by heavy air traffic, nor is the region a densely populated area. The wide-open spaces within Sweden's borders also mean no bureaucratic red-tape to be resolved with other countries.

Kiruna also has 60 years experience of [space research](#) to its credit. IRF was founded in 1957 and the Swedish space research and rocket centre Esrange, located in the town, was founded in 1966.

"We have to use this knowledge to create a unique adventure with global impact: space travel," Nilsson insisted.

"Even if it's too early to give any figures, market studies show there is potential for 14,000 travellers after 10 years of business," she added.

Spaceport Sweden is not building its own spacecraft, but will instead collaborate with a company that is doing so, she says, refusing to disclose how many spacecraft it will operate nor the identity of its partner.

In the [United States](#), several companies are already developing aircraft capable of carrying space tourists, such as Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic.



Sweden's northernmost town of Kiruna on November 16, 2012. The small Arctic town has a surprisingly international airport with regular flights to London and Tokyo, but it has even bigger plans: to offer commercial space flights.

"The technology isn't fully developed yet," Nilsson said, adding that the companies were currently carrying out test flights in the United States.

The first [commercial space](#) flights are expected to take place in the United States in 2014 and a few years after that in Sweden.

The head of the Esrange space research and rocket site, Lennart Poromaa, is meanwhile more measured in his enthusiasm for the project.

"In a few years there may be commercial space flights, but it will take longer than people think," he said.

Esrange pulled out of the project "because we're not about creating

adventure", he explained.

But "we could help them if they need help in the field of research, possibly", the aerospace engineer said.

According to Nilsson, space flights could take off four times a day. Esrange meanwhile launches four rockets a year.

"Researchers who want to test their experiments in microgravity may be able to fly with us and then adjust their projects," she said.

In the United States, more than 1,000 tickets for space flights have already been reserved, at around \$200,000 (153,000 euros) apiece.

For adventure-seekers who can't wait to visit space, Spaceport Sweden already offers flights from Kiruna airport to view the northern lights, a spectacular phenomenon of colourful lights that streak across the night sky, for the tidy sum of 6,990 kronor (810 euros, \$1,059).

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