

Czechs ink deal with US space tourism firm

November 19 2013



A reproduction of a virtual video of XCOR Aerospace's Lynx in Beverly Hills, California, on March 26, 2008

Czech universities and firms have received the go-ahead to conduct scientific research on board an American space tourism aircraft, the Czech Space Office (CSO) said Tuesday.

The CSO inked the deal Monday with the firm XCOR Aerospace, which is putting the final touches on its Lynx aircraft designed to shuttle tourists to the brink of [outer space](#).

"The partnership with XCOR Aerospace, a world pioneer in commercial spaceflight, is an important step in our efforts to develop our country's space programme," CSO head Jan Kolar said in a statement Tuesday.

French and Dutch institutions have also signed similar contracts with XCOR Aerospace to send scientific projects up in space, according to Kolar.

The California-based company hopes to run its first test flights of the two-seater aircraft next year.

The size of a private plane, it was built to make four daily flights lasting around 30 minutes.

It is expected to reach an altitude of 61 kilometres (38 miles) with a speed of Mach 2, or twice the speed of sound, giving passengers a fleeting experience of near-weightlessness before returning to Earth.

Czech astronaut Vladimir Remek was the first non-Soviet, non-American to go up in [space](#), in 1978.

Three decades later the Czech Republic became the first of Europe's ex-communist states to join the European Space Agency.

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Citation: Czechs ink deal with US space tourism firm (2013, November 19) retrieved 8 June 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-czechs-ink-space-tourism-firm.html>

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