

3,2,1: SpaceX counts down to reveal mystery Moon traveller

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This artist's illustration courtesy of SpaceX shows the SpaceX BFR (Big Falcon Rocket) passenger spacecraft, which has only been shown in designs and images so far

SpaceX says it will reveal on Monday the name of the mysterious passenger it plans to send into orbit around the Moon, an ambitious project spearheaded by eccentric CEO Elon Musk.

An event to unveil the first lunar traveler since the last US Apollo

mission in 1972 is planned for Monday at 6:00 pm (0100 GMT Tuesday) at SpaceX's headquarters and rocket factory in Hawthorne, California, in the middle of metropolitan Los Angeles.

An onslaught of questions about the passenger's identity on Twitter has failed to coax any details from Musk, except one hint.

In answer to a query about whether Musk himself would be the passenger, he tweeted an emoji of a Japanese flag.

Until now, Americans are the only ones who have left Earth's orbit. A total of 24 NASA astronauts—all white men—voyaged to the Moon during the Apollo era of the 1960s and '70s. Twelve walked on the lunar surface.

In announcing the event last week, SpaceX described the journey as "an important step toward enabling access for everyday people who dream of traveling to space."

It also said it would reveal "why"—implying the mission may have a goal other than simply satisfying the whim of a wealthy client—as was the case with the first space tourist, Dennis Tito, an American businessman who in 2001 paid some \$20 million to fly on a Russian spaceship to the International Space Station.

The price of a SpaceX Moon ticket and the date of travel are unknown.

The ride will take place aboard a Big Falcon Rocket (BFR), which has only been shown in designs and images so far, and may not be ready for human flight for four to five years at least, according to industry media.

The BFR was first announced in 2016, touted as the most powerful rocket in history, even more potent than the Saturn V Moon rocket that

launched the Apollo missions five decades ago.

Last year, Musk said the BFR's admittedly ambitious goal was to make a test flight to Mars in 2022, followed by a crewed flight to the Red Planet in 2024.



California-based SpaceX is headed by Elon Musk, an internet entrepreneur and CEO of the Tesla electric car company

SpaceX chief operating officer Gwynne Shotwell has said the BFR's first test flight should take place next year.

'Multi-planetary species'

This isn't the first time Musk has vowed to send tourists around the Moon. Last year, he said two paying tourists would circle the Moon in 2018, but those plans that did not materialize.

As curiosity mounts over the futuristic BFR, Musk tweeted three images, showing it will consist of a first stage with engines and fuel systems, and a second stage with the spacecraft where the passengers will ride.

Like SpaceX's existing rockets, the Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy, the first stage can detach from the rest of the rocket and return to Earth for an upright landing.

The spacecraft will continue on toward the Moon, powered by its own engines.

The BFR spacecraft's shape is reminiscent of the space shuttle, the bus-like US spaceships that carried astronauts to space 135 times from 1981 to 2011.

Musk has said he wants the BFR's vessel to be able to hold around 100 people, and that the launch system could one day be used to colonize the Moon and Mars in order to make humans a "multi-planetary" species.

A Martian mission is far more complicated than a back-and-forth trip around the Moon.

A Mars trip could take three to six months, including several fuel-ups.

Going to the Moon could be far quicker. US astronauts generally made the trip in about three days.



The shape of SpaceX's Big Falcon Rocket, shown in an artist's illustration, is reminiscent of the space shuttle

Whatever the details, SpaceX is touting an experience considerably more ambitious than space tourism plans under development by other private companies.

Virgin Galactic, founded by British tycoon Richard Branson, and billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's rocket company Blue Origin, are working on trips to the edge of space that could offer tourists a chance at weightlessness for 10 minutes or so.

Virgin's trip will cost about \$250,000. Blue Origin's price has not been revealed.

Russian and Chinese companies are also working on space tourism plans.

Focus on NASA

Musk, who is also the CEO of Tesla Motors, has drawn attention in recent months over his erratic behavior.

He has alleged that a cave diver in Thailand who helped rescue stranded boys was a "pedo," smoked what appeared to be marijuana on a comedian's podcast, spooked Tesla investors with comments about the future of the electric car maker, and admitted to exhaustion and use of the sleeping pill Ambien.

But so far this year, his space firm has also kept up a schedule outpaced only by the Chinese government, making 15 launches with its Falcon 9 rocket.

Next year, SpaceX—which has received billions in NASA funding to ferry supplies to the ISS and build a crew vehicle—hopes to become the first private company to send astronauts to the space station.

"Top SpaceX priority is and will remain supporting @NASA crewed spaceflight and National Security missions," Musk tweeted Monday.

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