

For billionaire Jared Isaacman, the space tourism era begins

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Billionaire Jared Isaacman, who will command the first all-civilian mission into Earth's orbit, stands in front of a Falcon 9 rocket at SpaceX in Hawthorne, California

Jared Isaacman is not a professional astronaut, but by the end of the year

the young billionaire will have shot around the Earth multiple times at the helm of a space mission made up entirely of tourists.

The tech entrepreneur will blast off on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, in what will be the first all-civilian mission into Earth's orbit, which he will command and pay for himself.

The mission, named Inspiration4, "is the first step in a world where everybody can go and journey among the stars," Isaacman said with an enormous grin as he explained the project to AFP in front of SpaceX's headquarters in the Los Angeles suburb of Hawthorne.

The CEO of payments processing firm Shift4 Payments, which he founded at age 16 in his basement, is an experienced pilot, qualified to fly military aircraft, and already holds a world record for circumnavigating the globe in a light jet in less than 62 hours.

In 2012, he even founded his own company that trains pilots for the US military force, Draken International.

"I've been a space and aviation enthusiast since as long as I can remember," the 37-year-old said. "When I was in kindergarten, I remember looking at picture books of the space shuttle. I told my kindergarten teacher that 'Someday I'm going to go to space.'"

If all goes as planned, his childhood dream will come true in the last quarter of this year, according to SpaceX.

And the magical voyage is something he plans to share.

Isaacman is to be joined by three other novice astronauts for the multi-day journey—including one lucky winner of a drawing—aboard the same model of Dragon spacecraft that carried four astronauts to the

International Space Station in November 2020.



SpaceX CEO and founder Elon Musk reportedly said anyone who can handle a really tough roller coaster can handle riding in the Dragon capsule

'Everyday people'

"Probably the most exciting part of this mission is that we are opening up this crew selection process to everyday people," Isaacman said.

"You have folks walking around today that don't realize in 30 days from now they're going to get fitted for a spacesuit," he added.

The idea, Isaacman said, is to have a crew that reflects "the key pillars of the mission": hope, generosity and prosperity.

The "hope" seat will be going to a female healthcare worker who survived cancer as a child following treatment at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, which specializes in childhood cancers and pediatric diseases.

The second seat, "generosity," will be part of a fundraiser for the hospital, he said, with a name drawn at random from online donors. Isaacman himself is additionally giving \$100 million to the St. Jude organization.

The third seat, which symbolizes "prosperity," will go to an entrepreneur who can best explain "how their business is going to make a difference in the world."

The competition is open to US residents over age 18, but does not require any unusual physical or technical skills, he said.



The SpaceX Falcon 9 lifts off in Cape Canaveral, Florida on January 24, 2021

Isaacman recounted that SpaceX CEO and founder Elon Musk had told him that "if you can handle a really, really tough roller coaster, you should be able to handle riding on Dragon."

The NASA astronaut selection process is so choosy that "you have a better chance of getting hit by lightning," but that is not the case here, Isaacman said.

His mission is slated to last for several days, during which the space tourists will orbit the globe once every 90 minutes—but won't just be watching the Earth pass by below.

"We intend to spend a lot of our time working on experiments" on behalf of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital or other organizations,

Isaacman said.

At the end of the mission, the capsule will re-enter Earth's atmosphere for a water landing off the coast of Florida.

Isaacman doesn't rule out sending more tourists into space: If the mission is successful, he said, then "there's going to be an awful lot of people who are going to get the opportunity to go up and explore among the stars."

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