

Japanese startup unveils balloon flight space viewing tours

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Keisuke Iwaya, left, CEO of a Japanese space development company, Iwaya Giken, and Takayuki Hanasaka, JTB Senior Managing Executive Officer, pose for a photo after unveiling a two-seater cabin and a balloon that the company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, as he speaks during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko

A Japanese startup announced plans Tuesday to launch commercial space viewing balloon flights that it hopes will bring an otherwise astronomically expensive experience down to Earth.

Company CEO Keisuke Iwaya said passengers do not need to be billionaires, go through intense training or have the [language skills](#) needed to fly in a rocket.

"It's safe, economical and gentle for people," Iwaya told reporters. "The idea is to make [space tourism](#) for everyone." He said he wants to "democratize [space](#)."

The company, Iwaya Giken, based in Sapporo in northern Japan, has been working on the project since 2012 and says it has developed an airtight two-seat cabin and a balloon capable of rising up to an altitude of 25 kilometers (15 miles), where the curve of the Earth can be clearly viewed. While passengers won't be in [outer space](#)—the balloon only goes up to roughly the middle of the stratosphere—they'll be higher than a jet plane flies and have an unobstructed view of outer space.

The company teamed up with major Japanese travel agency JTB Corp., which announced plans to collaborate on the project when the company is ready for a commercial trip. Initially, a flight would cost about 24 million yen (\$180,000), but Iwaya said he aims to eventually bring it down to several million yen (tens of thousands of dollars).



A two-seater cabin that a startup company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, is displayed during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The Japanese startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko

While Japanese space ventures have fallen behind U.S. companies like SpaceX, Iwaya said his aim is to make space more reachable.

SpaceX launched three rich businessmen and their astronaut escort to the International Space Station in April for \$55 million each—the company's first private charter flight to the orbiting lab after two years of carrying astronauts there for NASA.

But unlike a rocket or a [hot air balloon](#), the Iwaya Giken vessel will be lifted by helium that can be largely reused, company officials said, and flights will safely stay above Japanese territory or airspace. The first trip is planned as early as later this year.

The balloon, which can carry a pilot and a passenger, would take off from a balloon port in Hokkaido, rise for two hours to as high as 25 kilometers (15 miles) and stay there for one hour before a one-hour descent. The drum-shaped plastic cabin is 1.5 meters (4.9 feet) in diameter and has several large windows to allow a view of space above or the Earth below, the company said.



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as he speaks during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The Japanese startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



A Japanese entertainer Arisa Kuroda boards a two-seater cabin that a startup company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The Japanese startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Staffers carry a two-seater cabin that a startup company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The Japanese startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



A journalist tries to board a two-seater cabin that a startup company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, is displayed during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The Japanese startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Keisuke Iwaya, CEO of a Japanese space development company, Iwaya Giken, unveils a two-seater cabin and a balloon that the company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, as he speaks during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The Japanese startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



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Raita Naka, head of the public relation for a Japanese startup company, Iwaya Giken, speaks after an unveiling event as he boards a two-seater cabin that the startup company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



A staffer cleans a two-seater cabin that a startup company says is capable of rising to an altitude of 15 miles, which is roughly the middle of the stratosphere, during a news conference in Tokyo, Tuesday, Feb. 21, 2023. The Japanese startup company announced plans Tuesday to launch a commercial space viewing balloon flight that it hopes will bring down to earth an otherwise astronomically expensive experience. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



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Applications for a space viewing ride opened Tuesday and will continue through the end of August. The first five [passengers](#) selected will be announced in October, company officials said, and flights will be approximately a week apart, depending on the weather.

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