

future focus

Space tourism was a pipe dream until Dennis Tito bought his £14m return ticket to the ISS. Now a Brit is close to his dream of a privately funded manned spaceflight. Wendy Brewer finds out whether we'll soon be binning Marbella for the son of Mir

Ever since James Kirk first stuttered his way through an episode of Star Trek, people have dreamed about taking control of the Starship Enterprise.

A recent survey conducted by Nasa's National Aerospace Laboratory found that of the 1,020 American households questioned, 60 percent were interested in travelling into space for holiday purposes. Nearly 47 percent of those people were willing to pay as much as three months salary for the privilege. But for those of us who don't have the odd million lying about, there may be a while to wait.

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Little trip to heaven

The first paying 'space tourist' was Dennis Tito, who visited the International Space Station this year after purportedly paying a whopping £14m for the privilege. South African-born internet entrepreneur Mark Shuttleworth is tipped to be next.

But even MirCorp, which sold Tito his ticket to the International Space Station, holds a rather pessimistic outlook on the future of space tourism. "We do not believe space travel will become as common as air travel," said group



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spokesman Jeffrey Lenorvitz. "Space travel will always be for a relatively select group of people." Nasa has also expressed its concerns and said more research needs to be done before space tourism has "any kind of future".

A new hope

However, in November British university lecturer Steve Bennett launched his rocket, Nova (pictured). Bennett is also managing director and chief executive of Starchaser Industries, set up to compete in a race that could make personal space travel a reality.

The race for space began in May 1996 in St Louis. With support from several space organisations and funding from local businesses, the 'X prize' was made to encourage non-government organisations to join in. Entrants have to design a new generation of launch vehicles for space tourism. The first group to send three people into space safely earns £7m. There are currently 19 teams contending from five different countries. Starchaser Industries is the UK's entrant.

Nova took around 14 months to build. The team encountered many hurdles on the way but by far the most difficult has been convincing people that personal space travel is anything more than a pipe dream. "This has been the biggest stumbling block and something we're working very hard to remedy," said Bennett. He contends that Starchaser will be offering commercial sub-orbital flights by 2006 for about £200,000.

Anyone for tennis?

Meanwhile MirCorp, which is not directly involved with the X prize, is now developing the first ever commercial space station, focusing on what people will actually do in space. The group expects a 20-day trip to the 'galactic hotel' to cost around \$20m.

To MirCorp though, says Lenorvitz, space stations made entirely for tourism have no future. Instead they will need to fill a whole spectrum of purposes, including medical development and satellite imaging, in order to make a profit.

Bennett disagrees: he's convinced many people will be able to afford space travel within as little as 20 years. "[In real terms] it will be about as expensive as a return flight on Concorde or a luxury flight is today". You could go for that, couldn't you? ■