



Holidays in Space Only 20 Years Away?

By Sara Marani

posted: 01:00 pm ET

19 November 1999



LONDON, Nov 17 (Reuters) - Imagine an ultra expensive holiday with nothing to do but stare into space.

Though that prospect may do little to lure you to rush out and book, the World Tourism Organisation predicts it will soon be a popular choice and that space travel will be commonplace by 2020 -- low orbit trips may even take off within three years.

And as companies trip over each other building crafts to whisk adventurous tourists there first, an international design firm is concentrating on building a place for them to stay.

Architects Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo (WAT&G), creators of the Legoland Theme Parkin Windsor, southern England, are hoping to solve the outer space hotel dilemma.

Their space resort, part cruise ship and part theme park, will accommodate 100 people as they orbit the Earth 300 km (186 miles) up, dining on hydroponically grown food.

Still in its conceptual stage, the space hotel will be like a spinning bicycle wheel with spokes that will simulate normal earth gravity in some parts and have zero gravity in others, allowing for weightless sport and entertainment.

Howard Wolff, vice president of WAT&G, expects to have the space resort up and running by 2017.

``A flight up to the resort will be quicker than flying from Hong Kong to Singapore," he told Reuters.

``It will travel in low earth orbit, about 320 kilometers from Earth -- that's about the same distance as London to Bath," said Wolff, who is in London to present the project at the annual World Travel Market forum.

Passengers will be able to take excursions to the Moon, spacewalking to what he calls ``the Cannes of the solar system."

To keep costs down, the resort will be built mainly of orbiting space junk, like discarded fuel tanks from space shuttle missions.

The main body of the hotel will be created by linking the pieces together in a circle. So there's no expense in getting them out there because they've already been launched.

WHAT PRICE FOR SPACE TRAVEL?

But the biggest barrier for the starry-eyed tourist will of course be the cost.

“We're aware that cost will be a factor and initially it will be restricted to wealthy travelers, but people are already queuing up for sub-orbital trips at \$100,000 a go,” said Wolff.

“The catch-22 is that until there's public demand for space travel, costs will never come down. Private enterprise could eventually develop this at a tenth of the cost the government pays now, without jeopardizing safety.”

But Wolff is counting on the attraction of three things -- the chance to experience weightlessness, something different from sun, surf and sand holidays, and the idea that the view of this planet is “truly a life-transforming experience.”

“Almost anything you can do on Earth you can do in space in a totally new way. Two dimensions become three. Objects behave differently in space so something as simple as the action-reaction law takes on interesting twists when it comes to, say, having sex in space,” Wolff says.

“People are developing body bags, velcro straps to keep you together -- it's kind of kinky, but could be good fun...But the point will be to strike a balance between an out-of-this world experience and providing some creature comforts that travelers have come to expect in other destination resorts,” Wolff said.

MOONWALKER BACKING

Buzz Aldrin, former U.S. astronaut and the second man to step on the moon, is a consultant to the scheme, which has NASA's blessing in an effort to encourage public space travel.

And **Aldrin** has made sure the design includes a refuge for those passengers expected to suffer from 'space sickness'.

Other downsides include Space Adaptation Syndrome -- when blood flows into the chest and face, bloating the upper body -- unpleasant and hardly ideal for holiday snaps.

Then there's the effect of spinning, called the Coriolis effect, which creates nausea caused by fluid in the ears. So a spinning hotel might feel like being on a ferris wheel for a week.

But **Aldrin** insists the trip is definitely worth taking.

“The view from space is like having a globe on your desk -- it's a broadening experience,” he says.

WAT&G NOT ALONE OUT THERE

But WAT&G is only one of a growing number of companies pouring money into these projects, hoping to make space tourism more comfortable, more accessible and eventually profitable.

A Japanese company has made blueprints for an orbiting space hotel and a Seattle consortium has already begun booking spots for \$98,000 each on space flights scheduled to begin in 2002 aboard a still-to-be-built "Space Cruiser" modelled on the X-15 high altitude test plane.

Momentum was added a few years ago with the launch of the X-Prize by a U.S.-based non-profit foundation offering \$10 million for the first company to launch a re-usable rocket vehicle that makes two consecutive trips carrying at least three civilians to 100 km above Earth.

Officially classified as space, this distance affords a spectacular view of the Earth.

Research group Japanese Rocket Mission believes it could make space tourism a six billion dollar industry by 2010.