



Flights of Fantasy

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By Betsy Model

Imagine spending Christmas on the moon. Or celebrating New Year's on Mars. Holiday adventures such as these aren't nearly as far-fetched as many people once thought. Just ask former astronaut **Buzz Aldrin**.

Sticks and stones may break his bones but calling him a space cadet will never hurt his feelings or his career.

In fact, astronaut/scientist/businessman/author Buzz Aldrin has made an extraordinary career out of being called everything from "rocket man" and "Major Buzz" to just plain "spacey."

The names are usually said with respect, sometimes awe, and, occasionally, with amusement. Regardless of the intent, Buzz Aldrin—who together with crewmate Neil Armstrong left man's first footprints on the moon in 1969—continues to be one of the most visible, and definitely vocal, proponents of space travel and the business of putting men on the moon.

"The moon? The moon's good," says Aldrin, "but we need to be talking about Mars. Mars is where our attention should be...for exploration, yes, but also for colonization. We're still not thinking big enough."

Okay. But first, an author's confession: just a few years ago, I was one of the ones who, while maintaining a straight face, wondered if the former walker might be, well, a little out there.

My first interview with Buzz Aldrin was in May 2000, following the publication of his second work of fiction, "The Return." Co-authored with John Barnes, his collaborator on an earlier book ("Encounter With Tiber") Aldrin was asking readers to look a decade or so away into a future that would include recreational adventure travel into space.

At the core of Aldrin's fictional foray was an ex-astronaut who arranges space shuttle slights for consumers with either money or clout. The plot of "The Return" centered on one of these adventure-travel flights having a disaster on board while carrying an NBA superstar names Michael James ("MJ" for short...get it?), a hydrogen bomb exploding during a war between India and Pakistan, and the subsequent knocking out of satellites and the stranding of a space station.

If the concept of a war between India and Pakistan didn't raise most readers' eyebrows, the concept of a little adventure trip to space—the contemporary twist to a weekend in Pars—did. Furthermore, Aldrin was only too happy to explain to those catching him on radio, on television, or in print interviews that while the story was fiction, the reality was that this was all possible...and possibly by 2005.

Aldrin claimed that he wrote the book in part to begin laying the mental groundwork for orbital and sub-orbital travel which, he claimed, was just around the corner for the wealthy consumer wanting recreational travel that's a bit less "been there, done that" than viewing the Panama Canal.

"A new industry of adventure travel could and would benefit government exploration," insisted Aldrin. "Economically, the government would receive a huge boost from the dollars generated by going into space, allowing NASA and similar programs the ability to go out even further."

Toward that goal, presumably, Aldrin founded the non-profit ShareSpace, a kind of lottery ticket plan to raise \$10 million dollars to help launch the first consumer-passenger shuttle flight. With enough individuals purchasing \$10 tickets, Aldrin said, those who bought tickets stood the chance to win everything from rides on zero gravity training planes to sub-orbital trips, and, possibly, a grand prize that could get them all the way into the space station.

In 2000, Aldrin theorized that the first flight by citizens could take place in five years or so—certainly within 15. And what lay beyond could range from space stations complete with spas and casinos to human exploration on Mars.

Even as NASA administrators groaned each time Aldrin put a spin on Star Trek by making space not the final frontier but the frontier soon available from you travel agent, those of us simply worrying about whether we needed a visa for Argentina—or was that Brazil?—walked away from his books and his predictions either yearning, doubting, or laughing.

Well, no one—myself included—is laughing now. We're too busy trying to keep up with who's just written the latest large check (perhaps to the chagrin

to the folks at NASA) to the Russian Aviation and Space Administration (NASA) for a seat on the Soyuz.

Although NASA has allowed a few political figures, including Congressman Bill Nelson and Senator Jake Garn, to accompany crews into space, “citizens” were banned on such flights, the result of the 1986 death of schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe onboard the Challenger. (The space agency made a quasi-exception when they allowed Senator and former astronaut John Glenn to participate in a 1998 flight on the space shuttle, but made it very clear that Aldrin’s idea of space being within the reach of consumers, even those wealthy enough to pay their own way, was out of the question.)

Russia’s financially battered space agency, however, was happy to talk to those with the financial and physical wherewithal to purchase a seat alongside trained cosmonauts. When it came down to payloads large enough to keep their space program afloat, the Russians haven’t said nyet yet.

In 2001, less than a year after Buzz Aldrin’s book-tour commentary on consumers in space brought disbelief, American businessman Dennis Tito, now 61, purchased a flight for a cool \$20 million. NASA was not amused by the purchase of the week-long trip to space and made its displeasure known the general public, their counterparts at NASA, and significantly, to the American astronauts already onboard the international space station.

According to news reports, the two NASA astronauts were given strict instructions to not allow Tito to go into American sections of the space station unattended and, perhaps most tellingly, to not show acceptance or approval by hugging Tito in front of a camera lens.

A New Tune For NASA

What a difference a year makes. Earlier this spring, when the appropriately named South African Internet tycoon Mark Shuttleworth, 28, became the second man within 14 months to plunk down \$20 million for a trip to space via Kazakhstan, it was following a pow-wow among the other countries that have programs at the space station. This time NASA offered complimentary words to the media about Shuttleworth (who former South African president Nelson Mandela dubbed “...world’s first ‘Afronaut’”) seemed almost at ease with what media had begun nicknaming “space-station vacations” and “\$20 Mil Joy Rides.”

Buzz Aldrin just smiles when asked how he feels about that fact that there are now waiting lists of folks willing to trade week-long cruises of the Caribbean for week-long cruises of the space station...even if the RSVPs are currently written exclusively in Russian.

“Not surprised, of course,” Aldrin answers. “It was bound to happen, and I was certain it would happen in this decade.”

Actually, it rather feels like Aldrin, 72, has always been destined for a career involving space. He was born in New Jersey to a mother whose maiden name was Moon and to a father who was a student of rocket developer Robert Goddard, aide to General Billy Mitchell, and who counted among his circle of friends Amelia Earhart and Charles Lingbergh.

Intent on creating his own name in aviation history, Aldrin graduated from West Point in 1951 (with honors and third in his class) and went on to fly 66 Sabre Jet combat missions during the Korean conflict. After his return to the States, he earned his Doctorate in Astronautics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Manned Space Rendezvous, and NASA later went on the use the techniques he devised, including the first space docking with Russian cosmonauts.

So what’s a retired NASA astronaut, Air Force Commander of the Test Pilot school at Edwards Air Force Base, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom supposed to do as a second act?

In Aldrin’s case, it’s simple: Continue the first act, but with a twist. Although Aldrin was anxious to go back into space, NASA declined and Aldrin turned his attention to getting others there—others as in you and me—and preferably not one at a time but by the dozens.

Rocket Science

In 1995, Aldrin founded Houston-based Starcraft Enterprises, a technological think-tank that has come up with multiple working designs for reusable shuttle launchers for both military and commercial airline jets, they can be brought down safely, undergo maintenance, be fueled, reloaded, and re-launched in a reasonable period of time.

“Changing the way rockets are designed would pave the way to transporting more people into space,” claims Aldrin. “It could lead to a next-generation type space shuttle carrying up to 100 people.”

Of course, since the laboratory-like International Space Station can only accommodate a tiny percentage of those 100 people—and that’s assuming that the governmental agencies involved would ever allow a non-scientist influx of people beyond one or two at a time—where would a large group of space tourists go?

Well, some grandiose statements and quasi-pledges of money have been made

by folks like Robert Bigelow, president of the Budget Suites of America hotel chain, who's publicly committed \$500 million to building a space hotel by 2015, provided there are viable transportation options, but Aldrin is more careful these days when asked about his views on recreation opportunities within the immediate future.

“The sheer trip is an adventure, an incredible adventure that in and of itself is unlike any other trip you could ever take,” says Aldrin. But will there be space stations that could serve as hotels (or) resorts?

“Yes, probably,” he adds. “As our ability to launch into space becomes more refined, and we find ways to do it that aren't cost prohibitive to the value of the payload, we'll probably see more and more options become available. I would expect we'll also see colonization efforts on Mars—maybe sooner than people imagine—but the trick right now is how to get there. That's what we're working on at Starcraft.”

That's not all that Aldrin's working on. A member of President Bush's Commission on the Future of the United States Aerospace Industry; he's also a frequent guest speaker on television and radio talk shows and a motivational speaker for corporations like Seagate Technology, Hewlett Packard, and British Telecom. Moreover, when he and his wife Lois aren't tooling around Los Angeles with license plates that read “Mars Guy” and “Moon Gal,” he's penning non-fiction books and assisting individuals attempting to qualify for the next Soyuz launch into space.

As this article was being written, Aldrin was championing the 'N Sync boy band crooner Lance Bass, 23, for the fall of 2002 opening with the Russian space crew, although there is an active—and growing—waiting list of folks confident that they can come up with the \$20 million ticket price, including a Polish businessman, a former NASA administrator, and, reportedly, Hollywood director (“Terminator,” “Titanic”) James Cameron.

And speaking of Hollywood directors, did Aldrin have a movie in mind—or was it a popular NBA figure with the initials of MJ—when he wrote “The Return?”

“I've always admitted that I based the (fictional NBA) character of Michael James on Michael Jordan,” said Aldrin. “I mean, think about it...what greater persuasion could there be to the average Joe considering space as his next vacation than seeing someone like Michael Jordan, a national icon that people respect, heading into space?”

As for the movie potential, Aldrin also admitted that he had a movie, a drama in mind all along. “There was the “Men From Earth” documentary and then

“Apollo 13” and “From Earth to the Moon.” [And] I got to know Ron Howard and Tom Hanks a bit working on (various projects), and I have to say that I think “The Return” would be a great movie...would capture the hearts and minds of the moviegoer.”

According to Eric Anderson, president and CEO of Space Adventures, the Arlington, Virginia-based recreational travel agency that brokered both the Dennis Tito and Mark Shuttleworth trips, it's Buzz Aldrin who's in part responsible for capturing the hearts and minds of anyone who has ever thought that a trip into space in this lifetime was out of the question except for a lucky NASA-employed few.

“Buzz is clearly a household name,” says Anderson. “He's a leadership figure; he's a great hero in American history, and he's been a fantastic proponent of space tourism because he's a visionary. He understands and has been able to communicate to people that space tourism is more than just tourism and entertainment...it's really space exploration.

Like Explores of Old

“The great explorers of old, many of them financed their own ventures or adventures—great things were done for human history, for expanding human horizons, and for finding new resources and new knowledge under the umbrella of what we call ‘exploration,’” says Anderson.

“People like Dennis Tito or Mark Shuttleworth,” Anderson continues “are paying their own way to the space station, (but) what they're really doing is investing in the future themselves and allowing us to push the envelope and build new business, find new resources and better ways to use space to help people here on earth. It's really a much more noble thing than just ‘tourism.’ It's not like going to the beach for the weekend. It's something that has far greater meaning for humanity, and I think Buzz has been able to see that and talk about that and motivate people.”

Anderson, whose company reaps benefit from man's renewed interest in space exploration, claims that the answer to our fascination is as clear as the man in the moon.

“People around the world really like space,” says Anderson. “It's ingrained in our genes and the same reason that a baby crawls out of his crib and crawls around the corner that he's never seen before...people like to explore and expand. Space is the ultimate frontier, the ultimate destination. It's everything but Earth.”