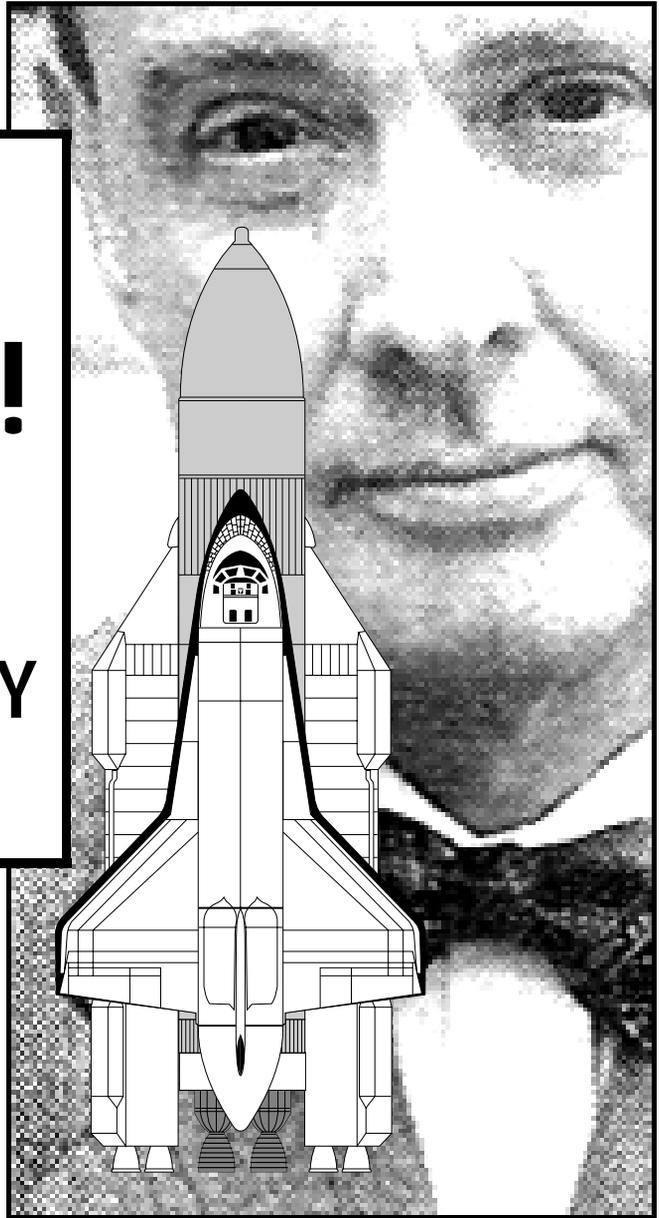


SPACE ADVENTURE!

WHY I AM PAYING £75,000 FOR A HALF-HOUR HOLIDAY

MADSEN PIRIE



I understand what made Dennis Tito blow £14m on a single week's holiday. He became the world's first space tourist, but others will follow, including myself. If I had the £14m to spare, I would do what he did, and take the ride into orbit for a week aboard the space station Alpha, cocking a snook at Nasa and all those who think space travel is only for heroes. As it is, with more modest means, I have settled for a sub-orbital hop, the same as that taken by Alan Shepard, America's first man in space.

SPACE DUST

This is something I have wanted to do since I was a boy. I took up astronomy at the age of eight, fascinated by the stars and by the prospect of the alien planets that encircled them. *The Eagle* comic, with its full-colour cartoon of Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, also did much to stimulate my young imagination.

At the age of thirteen I spent months of clear evenings at a home-made, long-focus telescope mapping the near

side of the moon. It takes months because you draw the moon best along the terminator, the line where a rising sun casts the longest shadows and highlights the moon's surface features.

You either have space dust or you don't. The world's first philosopher, Thales, had it. We know this because a story tells how he fell into a ditch while looking up at the stars.



Personal Perspectives No. 16

ISSN 0267-7156 ISBN 1 85637 529 3

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN

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This piece was first published by the *Sunday Times*, in the "News Review" section, May 13 2001, and is reprinted with permission.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



ONLY IN OUR LIFETIME

I know the feeling. Some look at stars and think "how nice". Others pick out the red giants, the blue-white dwarfs, the double stars and the nebulae. Ah yes, the nebulae. More than a hundred thousand million of them, each with a hundred thousand million stars. Many of us knew intuitively what science now confirms: that many of the stars have planets.

I am and always have been desperate to see them from space, unfiltered through the atmosphere, desperate to float in zero gravity, free of the Earth's pull. Of all of the generations of hominids who have looked at the stars for three million years, only in our lifetime has it been possible for human beings to look at this planet from the outside, and even, for a few lucky ones, to walk on the surface of another world.

Tito has blazed a trail. Before he came along with his money, you had to be a professional astronaut, usually a test pilot or a fighter pilot, before you could partake of that experience. Now anyone can hope to do it, and very soon many people will.

ABOVE THE ATMOSPHERE

A few years back I read an intriguing article about space tourism, and the vehicles being developed to make it possible.

I tracked down Space Adventures on the internet, and discovered it was taking bookings for a space experience. More significantly still, it had a British agent, Windwings of Bristol, which was prepared to sign up British space voyagers.

What is on offer is a sub-orbital hop. You are propelled by a rocket-powered vehicle to a height of 100 kilometres (about 65 miles). The vehicle executes a parabolic trajectory before its re-entry into the atmosphere and lands, as the space shuttle does, on a conventional-type runway. At 65 miles you are above the atmosphere. The sky is black, the stars vivid, and the Earth is a giant circle in your window.

You experience free fall. At the top of the ride, you are weightless, floating in zero-g, watching objects drift about the cabin. The passengers, perhaps six in all, will each be allowed to float around and experience the sensation.

One advantage you have over Tito is that the duration is probably too short for many people to experience space sickness. He had a week in space, but the sub-orbital riders get less than half an hour.

BAD BUSINESS TO KILL OFF FARE-PAYING PASSENGERS

Let's face it: it isn't Tito's flight into Earth orbit. But then it isn't £14m either. The price for this toe-in-the-water space experience is \$100,000 (about £75,000). You face a week of training, rather than the six months which Tito went through. And you don't have to speak Russian.

I signed up for it, and was surprised to discover I was the first person in Britain to do so, though there is now at least one other. Space voyagers must pay a deposit of 5%, and gradually pay more as the various stages towards lift-off are reached. The final payment is made just before the week of training before take-off. You have to pay for the return trip, whether or not you make it back.

In fact, the risks will be small, if only because it is very bad business to kill off fare-paying passengers. Space Adventures is wisely waiting to see which of the various teams trying to develop the flight vehicle will be the first to receive their certificate of space-worthiness. One of the contenders is the British outfit, Bristol Spaceplanes. The first civilian flights could start, we are told, in 2003.

The fact that we will land like a conventional plane makes a big difference. Tito landed in a parachute-supported capsule, and much of his training was in preparing to cope with touchdown on water, in the desert, in the jungle, or various other hostile environments.

Our flight needs less training because it is on a smaller scale. But it still is space, and in addition to our flight suits, we also get to keep the astronaut's wings that are awarded to those who venture more than fifty miles high and travel in space.

THE EARTH RESPLENDENT IN A BLACK SKY

As a boy I read about Wernher von Braun. As a boy he dreamt about men travelling to the moon. As a teenager he joined the German Society for Space Travel and launched tiny rockets. He was signed up by the army, and designed the V-2 rockets that caused such destruction in the second world war. He led the team that launched America's first satellite, and before he died, saw his Saturn V rocket put men on the moon. He did what he had dreamt of doing.

Tito had, like me, a more modest dream. He wanted to travel in space, to see the Earth resplendent in a black sky, to float free of the Earth and to see the stars burning with undiminished light. By achieving his dream he has paved the way for many more of us. It will no doubt be commonplace in a few years' time, an expensive luxury, like a Concorde flight is now. The head of Nasa only last week predicted that people will be walking on Mars within twenty years. It cannot be long before newspapers sponsor space voyagers, and television quiz shows offer such trips as prizes.

WHAT PRICE IS TOO HIGH FOR A DREAM?

But I want to do it now. I have wanted it since I was a boy, and wanted it avidly enough to follow the ups and downs of every part of the space programme. I waited through the night to watch the first moon landing, and walked every step with the astronauts across the powdery surface.

There must be many like me, or there would be no commercial space flights in the offing. Tito was the first, but others, including myself, will follow. The fare is steep, admittedly, but what price is too high for a dream?