

Russia opens final frontier to space buffs

Marc Horne

Throughout the dark days of the Cold War Soviet space facilities were top secret and strictly off limits to all but the most important of apparatchiks.

Soviet civilians were oblivious while security services in the West would have paid huge sums for a glimpse of the clandestine testing unit attempting to reach the stars.

A remarkable deal between a Scottish travel company and the Russian space port means that amateur cosmologists can take a giant leap into the Star City training centre — for about £30,000.

For that not insignificant sum, devoted stargazers will be housed in quarters used by Yuri Gargarin, the first person in space, before being flown to Kazakhstan to meet a three-man crew destined for the International Space Station. They will enjoy VIP treatment while watching the manned launch.

After years of talks Big Wide World Travel, in Fife, secured exclusive permission to bring visitors into the Russian facilities.

Nicola Livingston, the company's director, said: "We have secured VIP access to the launch on September 25 which will take three astronauts to the International Space Station."

"This will include a private meeting with the trio before they embark on their mission, a chance to meet and talk with Kazakhstan-based Nasa officials and to experience the launch alongside the family and friends of the departing astronauts."

"Nothing like this has been offered to the public before. It is unique and we are anticipating a huge amount of interest from around the world."

After travelling to Star City, the Russian space training centre that was top secret and kept off maps in the Soviet era, visitors will take part in their cosmonaut training programme.

They will be instructed by Steven Swanson, a US astronaut who travelled to the space station in 2014.

After a three-night stay, with accompanied access to restricted areas, the group — whose numbers will be capped at 12 — will be taken to Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan by private

Scolpaig ... we have lift-off

It might not have the cachet of Cape Canaveral but a Hebridean island will soon be home to Scotland's first space centre.

Scolpaig, on North Uist's northwest coast, is being developed as a base from where rockets will be sent into orbit.

The consortium behind the project, called Spaceport 1, is led by the Western Isles council, which is spending about £1 million on buying land for the facility.

The first phase of the project is under way and will include the creation of the basic infrastructure needed for rocket launch trials.

The second phase will put in place the facilities to launch larger vehicles capable of orbit, followed by equipment to allow launch vehicles to be assembled on site.

It is expected to create 70 jobs for the Western Isles. The consortium consists of the council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the security firm QinetiQ and Commercial Space Technologies in London.

jet. There they will meet the cosmonaut Oleg Skripochka, the Nasa astronaut Jessica Meir and Hazza al-Mansouri from the United Arab Emirates.

Baikonur is also being used by Nasa but their launches will return to the US in the near future.

Ms Livingston said: "The crew members will actually be in quarantine but our clients will get to meet them and speak to them through glass just before they head off."

"Places are going to be extremely limited to between eight and 12 people. When Nasa moves back to the US you are not going to get the same kind of access."

Mark Hempell, an aerospace engineer and spokesman for the British Interplanetary Society, felt that there



Tourists can train at Star City where Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut, prepared for his space mission

would be people willing to pay £30,000 for such close access.

"If they are taking people through astronaut training it is probably not an unreasonable sum of money," he said. "People are paying huge sums for the chance to actually go into space, so the cost is far less than that."

"The Russians have a history of trying to make money out of their space programme and good on them."

Alastair Bruce, of the University of Edinburgh school of physics and astronomy, said: "I could imagine paying for that experience myself."

"To get to meet the astronauts brings home the element of risk involved. I still regret passing up the chance I had to see a space shuttle take off. I was in Florida when I was aged ten but

Mo Farah claims silver ... at school sports day

Valentine Low

Sir Mo Farah is the most successful British runner in modern Olympic times, winning four gold medals as well as distance titles in successive world championships.

At a school sports day, not so much. A fellow competitor in the parents' race at his son Hussein's school in southwest London has achieved what many of the finest athletes of their generation so often failed to do, by showing Farah, 36, a clean pair of heels.

Admittedly, the 60 metres is not really Farah's distance: it might have been a different story over 5,000 metres, let alone 10,000 metres.

But a victory against an Olympic champion is still a victory.

In a video posted to Instagram by his wife Tania, Farah is seen being beaten into second place by a man believed to be a teacher at the school in Hampton Court. Farah finished just ahead of a catering boss.

A source told the *London Evening Standard*: "Mo likes to get involved — and luckily holds back so he doesn't make us look bad."

One supporter said: "The story of the bloke who beat Mo will be told to everyone he meets."

Fortunately for the family pride, three-year-old Hussein and his mother are believed to have won their races.

Michelle Griffith-Robinson, the former Olympic triple jumper and a friend of the couple, told Lady Farah on Instagram: "You should've given the others a head start."

Last year Farah, 36, admitted on *A League of Their Own* that he had finished third in a similar contest. He told James Cordell, the host: "I turned up thinking I was going to win and got my ass kicked. Not just third, but the geezer [who won] was wearing jeans and still kicked my butt."



decided to go to Disney World instead."

Tourists are expected to set off on space flights from the Scottish Highlands and Cornwall within a few years, with Virgin Galactic the most likely carrier.

The trips will take passengers beyond the Earth's atmosphere where they can experience weightlessness and see the curvature of the planet.

More than 600 people, including Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, have already paid £160,000 to take part in the inaugural suborbital flights. Saturday essay, pages 32-33



Olympic champion Mo Farah found the parents' race unexpectedly tough

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