

The \$20-Million Ticket to Ride

Dennis Tito Is the Ross Perot of Space Travel, Throwing Money at the Russians for an 8-Day Vacation Above the Earth, His Vision and Passion Unwavering

By Janet Wiscombe, Janet Wiscombe's last article for the magazine was a profile of Sally Ride

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Gazing out on the grounds of his palatial hilltop estate, it doesn't take long for the gentleman in the gray silk suit to reveal his passion: "This is my own spaceship on Earth," he says.

Here, in the rarefied atmosphere high above the Getty Museum in Pacific Palisades, Dennis Tito lives alone in one of L.A.'s poshest pads. He surrounds himself with the good things in life--a tennis court and pool, European antiques, tapestries and chandeliers. He parks his Ferrari in an eight-car garage. He spends fortunes on clothes and entertaining. He works out in a private gym that rivals Gold's, and regularly runs along a private jogging track that hugs a private pond. He gives away scads of money to the Los Angeles Opera, the Republican Party and other causes.

But what the investment manager really wants to do is fly in space. That's why he's willing to fork over \$20 million or so to hitch a ride aboard a Russian Soyuz spacecraft and blast out of Earth's orbit for an eight-day flight that includes a six-day sojourn aboard the International Space Station. If all goes according to his plan, on April 30 he will become the first American space tourist.

It would be a journey almost as remarkable before liftoff as after, for Tito is the Ross Perot of space travel. Like Perot, Tito is a small man with deep pockets and a large ego who couldn't get anywhere with established institutions. Perot stepped around the Republican and Democratic parties by founding his own political party. Tito had no luck with NASA, so he created his own private space program, with an astronaut corps of one.

He first heard about Russia's "guest cosmonaut" program 10 years ago (a Japanese TV reporter and a British scientist had paid to fly to the Mir space station), but the collapse of the Soviet Union delayed his dream. Last year he became a participant in the private, Amsterdam-based MirCorp's Citizen Explorer Program, a commercial effort that helped keep the decrepit Mir space station alive. Tito was willing to pay millions--\$20 million according to the MirCorp list price--for a chance to blast off. When the aging Mir was decommissioned in December, it looked as if Tito's space odyssey was history. But through contacts with cosmonauts in Star City, he eventually was able to develop a contract to fly with the Russian Space Agency. He won't specify details of the agreement or the exact price.

Tito, 60, is a lean and deliberate man of 5 feet, 5 inches and 140 pounds who grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Queens. He is a perfectionist who can't walk across a picture-perfect patio without straightening a wrought-iron chair, a son of uneducated Italian

immigrants who has earned his own way since he was 12. "My parents never encouraged me," he insists. "I did everything on my own."

The desire to travel in space surfaced in childhood and provided an early career path. After earning a master's in aerospace engineering at New York's Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Tito took a job as a rocket scientist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, developing trajectories on the Mariner 4 mission to Mars and the Mariner 5 mission to Venus. During his tenure at JPL, he indulged a fascination with applying his analytical skills to business.

In the late '60s, he took several courses in finance at UCLA and quit his government job to found the investment firm Wilshire Associates, which manages \$10 billion in assets by using mathematical tools to analyze market risks.

Despite Tito's connection to NASA three decades ago, the agency views him--at best--as a dilettante. Space travel is for trained astronauts, NASA officials say. It's about serious scientific exploration, not joy riding. NASA Administrator Dan Goldin doesn't want to offend the Russians, but is quick to say that the agency is very concerned about the safety and training of so-called "citizen astronauts." The priority of space travel, he says, "isn't for rich guys to have fun."

Yet NASA will not stand in the way of Tito's grand plan. The agency has no intention of telling the Russians what to do or who they can strap into their space seats. "We are very respectful of the Russians," Goldin says. "If this will help the Russians with cash flow, I love it."

Tito insists that he's not just some rich guy taking a joy ride. Sure, it'll be a thrill, but there's a greater cause involved: In addition to the millions that he'll plow into the Russian economy, he intends to share his knowledge of space with schoolchildren and lecture to the public. Tito plans to play a more public role in promoting space travel.

This makes NASA veterans cringe, but Tito doesn't care. "I don't want to be told by NASA what to do," he says. "It's not up to NASA to judge my qualifications. With NASA, it's more of an issue of maintaining space as a private club. You have to have certain qualifications. A wealthy individual comes along and is able to fly into space, and it doesn't fit their career pattern. That threatens their notions of 'The Club.' "

So how does a pampered 60-year-old investment banker train for space travel? Other than the month he spent at his 30,000-square-foot home for the holidays, since August he's been living in Star City, Russia--the no-frills military base outside Moscow where cosmonauts train. There, he lives in a spartan two-room apartment, attends classes eight hours a day to learn about such things as spacecraft power and motion-control systems, and participates in a grueling physical regimen that includes G-load endurance tests.

"I'm not a professional astronaut," Tito says. "But it's unfair to judge my qualifications unless you've been involved in my training. I'm as dedicated to the mission as any astronaut would be. I've come from a different path, but I've had the vision and the dedication to space all my life."

Tito is preparing to enter a world of straps and bungee cords, floating pliers and wrenches. He's signed up to sit atop a load of flaming rockets and hurtle into the great airless abyss. Despite the priceless view and the experience of whipping around the planet 16 times a day, it's not the stuff of five-star travel. He says he's aware of the real risks involved, that he will not be deterred.

"Orbiting 230 miles above Earth is the most fascinating experience you can have. Less than 400 people have had that experience." Mayor Richard Riordan, who considers Tito a friend, describes him as intense, brilliant and wealthy. He's jealous of Tito's space trip. "I'd like to go," Riordan says. "I hope I'd have the courage to go."

Tito has three grown children. His youngest, Brad, 23, a bearded fellow with long hair, doesn't have his father's affection for 30,000-square-foot mansions or extravagant cars. He studies sustainable living. "My father going up in a shuttle and using all that energy isn't exactly sustainable," he says sweetly. "But on a personal note, I support him 100%."

In the complex world of geopolitics, a lot could go wrong between now and April 30 that would prevent Dennis Tito from using his multimillion-dollar ticket to space. But like candidate Perot, it seems that cosmonaut Tito is driven enough and rich enough to do as he pleases. In the end, that may be enough to send him into orbit.