

# Space hotel

A Barcelona architect and entrepreneur is planning to offer travellers a room with one hell of a view.

By Matt Elmore.

Thousands of years before the great explorers crossed the oceans, daring humans ventured from the shores of *terra firma* in fragile crafts, braving the whims of natural forces. Without these first voyagers—those who tested the waters, so to speak—the technology and capacity to cross great expanses would never have been developed. There would have been no Columbus, no Vasco de Gama, no Magellan. Most say that it is our destiny to explore, that there is some part of the human genome that compels a substantial portion of our species to climb the highest mountain, or go the greatest distance. In effect, we strive for—or, at the very least, admire—the superlative in ourselves. Now that the entire Earth's surface has been visited by Homo Sapiens, with the exception

of the deepest ocean trenches, any human who has inherited the explorer's instinct must turn upward, toward the stars.

*“As of today we have 18 reservations.”*

And up is exactly where Barcelona architect, Xavier Claramunt, has set his sights for his next major project: an orbital hotel that, for €3 million, will offer its guests 15 sunrises a day and the opportunity to make love in a

zero-gravity environment. The Galactic Suite may offer only modest accommodations by the standards of expensive hotels, but like those early explorers who pushed outward in hollowed-out tree trunks, Claramunt plans to venture into the threshold of space by tapping into a nascent, yet burgeoning, industry known as Space Tourism.

The Galactic Suite, which anticipates receiving its first guests in 2012, will look like white grapes bunched on a vine, consisting of interconnected modules, seven by four metres, with port windows. Guests will manoeuvre or anchor themselves using velcro suits against carpeted walls. The package includes transportation to a Caribbean island facility for eight weeks of training, launch from the same facility to an altitude of 450 kilometres,

- ▲ Three nights in space will set you back €3 million.
- ▶ Views will be out of this world.

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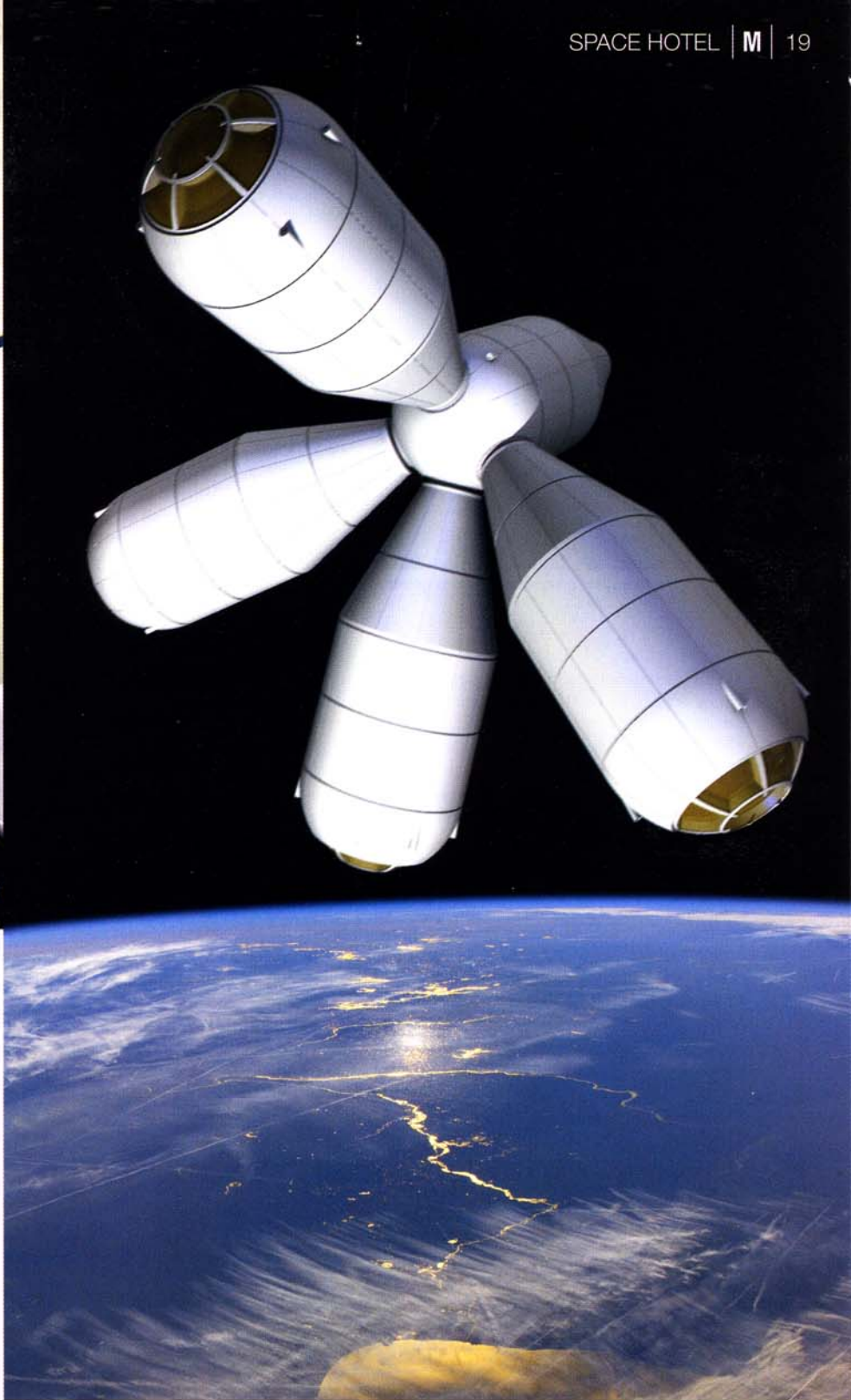
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Photos courtesy of *The Galactic Suite*.



and three nights' stay, during which guests will circle the globe every 80 minutes. "As of today, we have 18 reservations," Claramunt told *Metropolitan* in September.

Claramunt's firm, L'EQUIP, is a self-described multi-disciplinary office, which combines architecture, interior design, industrial processes and jewellery. Winner of a Contract World prize for its work on Hotel Chic & Basic on Carrer Princesa, they are no strangers to cutting-edge projects. An undersea hotel off the coast of Alicante is also currently in development. Another project in the works is the Flamenco Towers, an impossible-looking set of inhabited, twisting structures. Inspired by the flamenco dance, they will tower 220 metres above the city of Hangzhou, China. Claramunt, by his own report, is absorbed in

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his work, pulling 14-hour days, seven days a week. The basic philosophy behind his projects seems always to be: think big, then settle on what's possible.

Claramunt credits his firm's multi-disciplinary process as key to the innovation and creativity that they consistently generate. There are 30 employees directly involved in his company, but other projects create offshoots. The Galaxy Suite Project, for example, has 12 designers from his firm dedicated exclusively to the venture, with another 30 engineers and architects contributing from outside the firm.

One secret that Claramunt is guarding closely is the identity of the mysterious backer who has reportedly provided €3 billion to the project. And it has been reported there are other investors from the U.S., Japan and the United Arab Emirates who have expressed interest in participating. Yet, despite this potent thrust of manpower, innovative minds and an astronomical supply of capital, not everybody believes that the project will succeed.

"I'm somewhat skeptical of the space hotel plan," said Dr. Robert Zubrin, an astronautical engineer, in an interview with *Metropolitan* from his Indian Hills, Colorado home in the US. "For certain people, tens of millions or even hundreds of millions is play money. Three billion is serious money no matter who you are. It's not an investment for people who are looking for the largest return for the least risk."

Robert Zubrin is the internationally renowned founder and president of the Mars Society and author of seven books. In the Nineties, fed up with the industry's lack of motivation in bringing down launch costs, he left his job as a senior engineer at Lockheed Martin and started his own launch company, Pioneer Astronautics. In his experience, there are too many people who like to talk big about investing in space, but few of them ever actually sign the check. Zubrin has dedicated his life to what he perceives as humankind's destiny to become a space-faring civilisation. "It's about making something happen that's important for the progress of humanity."

Among aerospace engineers, he's considered a practical visionary, keeping an eye always on the financial as well as technical viability of space-based projects. "Are there simply enough people willing to pay a few million dollars for a space vacation? I'm sure there will be a few, especially if they could be among the first. But after it's been in business for three years and it's no longer such a unique distinction as to having done this, how many people are going to be willing to shell out millions of dollars for a week on orbit?"

"When they come back and tell their friends, 'Yeah, I was on orbit and it was zero-G, but I was space-sick half the time and the place smelt like a latrine and so forth. You get to float around, but there isn't that much else to do.' After it loses its totally unique character, and people start looking at it in terms of value delivered for money spent, then I don't think the numbers add up."

In response to Zubrin's assertion, Xavier Claramunt is resolute and laconic. "The plan is viable."

His team has estimated that there are approximately 40,000 individuals in the world who could afford to stay in his hotel, though admittedly they are uncertain as to the percentage of these individuals who would actually sign on. A recent international survey by Adventure Holidays, Inc. reports that 72 percent of respondents would be willing to spend up to two weeks in space if the costs were accessible. However, these statistics are more a reflection of visitors to the Adventure Holidays website than the group of 40,000 exorbitantly wealthy individuals that Claramunt is banking on.

Another serious concern is the competition. L'EQUIP is a relative new-comer to space-tourism and must contend with an impressive field of competitors. Bigelow Aerospace, started by

American motel tycoon Robert Bigelow, has already sent inflatable module prototypes into orbit, which will ultimately serve as a combination of space station and orbital hotel, with a planned opening in 2012. Other groups, such as Hilton International, The Space Island Group, Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, and British Airways have expressed interest in opening space hotels. Virgin Galactic, as early as 2008, will also offer, for \$200,000, sub-orbital flights that will reach an altitude of 100 kilometres and last 2.5 hours.

Whether or not Claramunt's dream ultimately becomes a reality remains to be seen. He certainly has an impressive record of success behind him. In his own words, "You have to persevere in what you believe and push the envelope. And if it doesn't work out, you'll always have the experience." ■

## Other offers out there:

**Company:** Russian Space Agency  
**Anticipated Availability:** Present

**Cost:** \$30 million  
**Package:** 10-14 days aboard the International Space Station (ISS)  
**Contact:** Space Adventures ([www.spaceadventures.com](http://www.spaceadventures.com))

**Company:** Virgin Galactic  
**Anticipated Availability:** 2009

**Cost:** \$200,000  
**Package:** 2.5 hour sub-orbital Flight, 6 minutes of weightlessness  
**Contact:** [www.virgingalactic.com](http://www.virgingalactic.com)

**Company:** EADS Astrium  
**Anticipated Availability:** 2011

**Cost:** €150,000 to €200,000  
**Package:** 90 minute sub-orbital flight, 3 minutes of weightlessness, luxury accommodation in a theme park/resort  
**Contact:** [www.astrium.eads.net](http://www.astrium.eads.net)

**Company:** Bigelow Aerospace  
**Anticipated Availability:** 2012

**Cost:** \$15 million  
**Package:** 4 weeks aboard its own Commercial Space Station  
**Contact:** [www.bigelow-aerospace.com](http://www.bigelow-aerospace.com)

**Company:** Constellation Services International  
**Anticipated Availability:** As early as 2008

**Cost:** Yet to be announced.  
**Package:** One week aboard the International Space Station (ISS)  
**Contact:** [www.constellationservices.com](http://www.constellationservices.com)



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