



A GOOD OVERVIEW

SPACE TOURISM MAY BE THE DOMAIN OF THE RICH AT THE MOMENT, BUT IT MIGHT TEACH THOSE WHO GO THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCATION, SAYS **ALISTAIR MACLENAN**

I pushed the copy deadline for this month's article to the limit (sorry Ed) so that I could watch the Blue Origin space company successfully launch Jeff Bezos and his brother, Wally Funk, and a student who managed to stretch his study loan to US\$28 million for the ticket, beyond at least one of the various definitions of where the Earth's atmosphere ends and space starts.

It was thrilling and, frankly, bizarre to watch a group of smart-casual civilians clamber aboard a rocket that was not only able to deliver them into space but also deliver itself and them back to earth in one, reusable piece.

They all returned as astronauts. The description will sound especially sweet to Wally Funk: a woman who proved herself more than worthy of the title 60 years previously, only to find her application rejected for not having an engineering degree. John Glenn made it into space without one, so maybe the selection panel mixed up not having an 'engineering degree' with not having a 'Y-chromosome'.

It seems that 'space tourism' has arrived. Maybe it won't be too long before Elon Musk's Crew Dragon is delivering

customers of more modest financial means to the International Space Station for a weekend getaway of lounging in the Earth-view spa, sipping moonshine.

But will there be a meaningful reason to do so, over and above bragging rights on Instagram?

Going to a new place on Earth can expose travellers to new cultures, food, people and, crucially, ideas. Whilst many holidaymakers will return home with only sunburn and debt, a few will consider their lives a little more deeply.

But how can a trip beyond the mesosphere do that? There is nothing to see up there but the Earth out of one window and endless space from the other.

Since human beings have been able to share the concept, referring to our location has meant attributing it to somewhere on our home planet of Earth. Throughout the development of our species, the only criteria of 'location' that has changed, has been its scale.

Those who leave the planet gain a new and unique perspective on location.

X and Y coordinates no longer have any meaning when the grid you're looking

at is continuously curving, country borders aren't visible nor is the conflict they can often produce, weather is static and even time means nothing when an orbital day is 90 minutes long.

What can be seen is "a tiny, fragile ball of life, hanging in the void, shielded and nourished by a paper-thin atmosphere" and that sight can have a profound effect upon the viewer.

That is the Overview Effect. Coined by 'space philosopher' Frank White in 1987, the Overview Effect can leave those who experience it with a deep sense of responsibility for the future of Earth and its inhabitants.

If more people going to space means more people understand that effect – even listening to someone who has experienced it has been shown to alter the audience's thoughts – then a generation committed to the better treatment of the one planet we can call home for now, might be the surprising and beneficial unintended consequence of billionaires playing with their rockets.

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