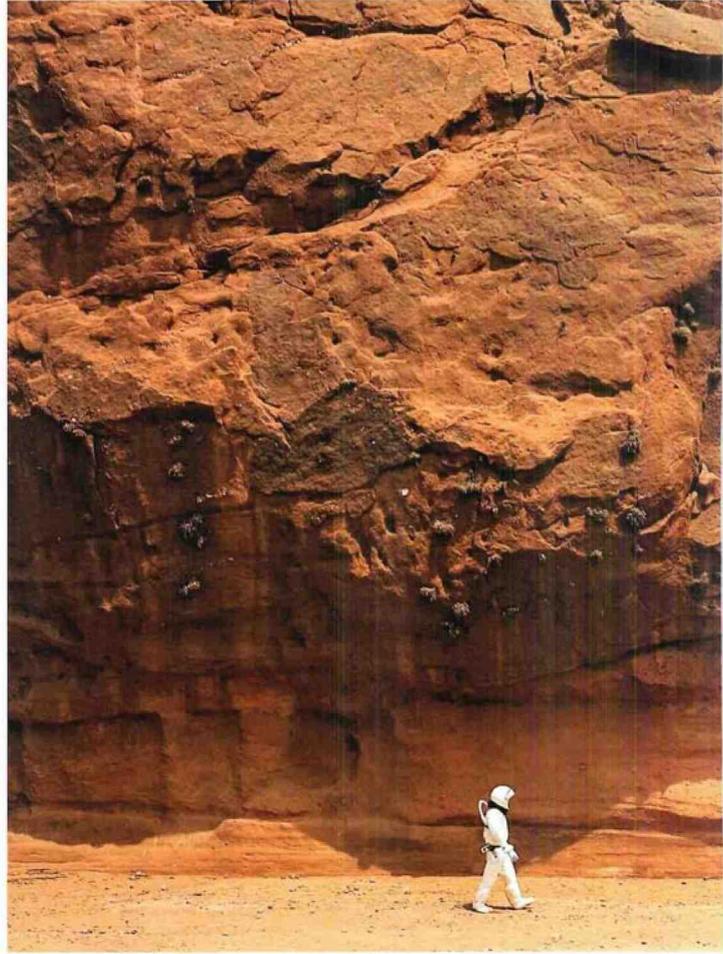

THE FINAL FRONTIER

The trip was managed by Axiom Space, a Houston-based company of predominantly ex-NASA staff that is building the world's first commercial space station attached to the ISS, designed by Philippe Starck and due to open in early 2024. Meanwhile, Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic and Jeff Bezos's Blue O ...





THE FINAL FRONTIER

ASTRO-TOURISM BOARD MEMBER COLLETT BELIEVES WE'LL ALL BE DINING ON CAVIAR IN SPACE

Ann-Francois

Ferret, a French astronaut who has spent almost a month in space, holds up a globe of water and lets it spin away. Blue as an ocean, it resembles a small earth as it rotates past my nose. I reach for it, unbalancing myself, and as my head tilts towards the floor, I see the globe shatter against the hood of a passing tech entrepreneur. I am a trainee space tourist, on a parabolic Zero-G flight in a converted Airbus A310 over the sea near Arcachon, on France's Atlantic coast. The stillly water is an ephemeral yet tangible representation of something that for decades has seemed mostly abstract: represented by renderings and

unfulfilled promises. But space travel has arrived, almost as if by stealth, and I'm here on a four-day astronaut training course run by French company Orbite.

The exercise is interrupted by a call of "feet down". I collapse to the padded floor of the jetliner and around me—surreally—falls a scattering of French high society, including a Pernod Ricard executive and the glamorous entrepreneur wife of a skincare billionaire. Here, though, we are like children on the plane, piloted by fighter and test pilot Eric Delonalle, begins to climb once more. He'll later tell me this is "a real job"; that one tiny mistake would see everyone crashing into the front toilet of the plane.

And it is true: attendants wait to catch those who push away too fast, hurtling through the cabin. At first my fellow passengers are eager, then intrepid and at last, in some cases, clearly queasy.

There is a call of "10", then "40", describing the aircraft's angle, then finally "injection". The big plane enters freefall. I am standing and my feet slowly separate from the floor, as do those of my fellow trainees. I do a slow, nervous somersault, like the new true astronaut's mule as they enter the International Space Station (ISS). It feels wrong, faintly terrifying, but out of this world. All the while, we are watched over by Briceana "Tieck" Bonnes, Orbite's director of astronaut training. Her positive mental attitude is as uplifting as the gravity-free flight.

I watch the Pernod Ricard executive, the epitome of calm sophistication, carefully explore the ceiling of the plane. A handsome 37-year-old who founded a start-up passes me like Superman.

IN A VERY A PERNOD RICARD EXECUTIVE, THE EPITOME OF CALM SOPHISTICATION, EXPLORE THE PLANE'S CEILING. A HANDSOME 37-YEAR-OLD WHO FOUNDED A START-UP PASSES ME LIKE SUPERMAN

The glamorous entrepreneur begins to feel unwell, but says it is only for a moment. When the next one begins she says she feels "the joy again".

Tech impresarios Nicolas Lemaire and Jason Andrews set up Orbite so that people could get a feel for the experience before dropping fortunes on the holidays to space that are finally coming to fruition. In April, four executives hired SpaceX to get them to the ISS for a 17-day stay—the first fully commercial visit. The trip was managed by Adren Space, a Houston-based company of predominantly ex-NASA staff that is building the world's first commercial space station attached to the ISS, designed by Philippe Stank and due to open in early 2024. Meanwhile, Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic and Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin both flew commercially for the first time last year, while new players are linking private clients to space operators such as Stellar Frontiers, founded by Geordie Mackay-Lewis of adventure travel company Pelorus.

The programme I join is designed to offer a taste of what such trips might entail – except with more oysters. Gaume, by his own account, made and lost a billion in computer games by the time he was 30. He is stratospherically tall and has a restless enthusiasm that is infectious. His family owns some of the top hotels on the quietly chic Arcachon peninsula, including the Stark-designed La Co(ô)roniche hotel – our eminently civilised base next to the 334ft-high Dune of Pilat, overlooking the sandbars and pinasse boats of Arcachon Bay. “You have a certain amount of training to be able to go through an experience in space,” he tells me. “But what we really want is for you to have fun and enjoy every bit of it, an experience that focuses not just on the technical but also the mental and spiritual. And that is different from what is available in the traditional training facility.”

Meals consist of whelks, oysters, crab and lobster – which seem most un-space-like, until chefs from Alain Ducasse’s team explain that they’ve created high-end gastronomy for astronauts in the space station, including tinned blue lobster and quinoa. We’ve joined for one meal by Lionel Suchet, COO of the French space agency, a man with the calm air of someone used to being on the other end of those calls from the cosmos that start: “We have a problem.” He says the appearance of space tourism isn’t a surprise, but the “velocity of change is very, very quick”. Another of the training modules, which also doesn’t mix with my diet

of huitres crues, is a turn in a tiny two-seat GBI GameBird, the latest acrobatic aircraft. At Arcachon airport, I am met by pilot Benoit Buffiere. His role is to recreate the G-forces of a rocket launch. In a plane the size of a racing car, we fly along the coast to find a swamp above which we do loops, rolls and stall turns. Finally, he performs a ruede, a move that sees the tiny aircraft cartwheel through the sky. I feel like one of those astronauts spinning out into the inky depths forever.

A constant backdrop to the experience is the idea that real trips to space are getting closer, even if a journey into orbit still costs north of about AED 190 million. Orbite uses virtual reality to recreate the sensation of flying in the various launch vehicles currently available.

I pop up and down in Bezos’s New Shepard and slice up to the edge of space in Branson’s SpaceShipTwo. I orbit in Musk’s Dragon capsule, looking down on Havana, the city where I live, as the sun comes up, and find myself thinking of those I love below. I travel around the moon on Musk’s Starship, the space cruise liner whose real version is currently going through flight trials in Texas. Afterwards, I stagger down to the edge of the sea and along to the great dune. Beginning to climb, like some lost soul on Mars, I slip on the sand. I roll over; above me the stars are beginning to come out in the darkening sky. Looking up, I realise that while space may be infinite, there’s little room for cynicism. I am now a believer. I want to go up. 🚀

ORBITING
IN ELON
MUSK’S DRAGON
CAPSULE, I LOOK
DOWN ON HAVANA,
THE CITY WHERE
I LIVE, AS THE
SUN RISES

THE FAR-FAR-OUT JOURNEYS ON THE HORIZON

VIRGIN GALACTIC

Hot on the heels of rivals such as Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin, Virgin Galactic has started taking reservations for 90-minute space flights, with plans to launch by the end of the year. The trip, which costs about AED 1.6 million, includes a Mach-3 boost from New Mexico’s Spaceport America, with several minutes of weightlessness and supposedly life-changing views of the curvature of the Earth. virgingalactic.com

AXIOM SPACE

Made up of ex-NASA staff, Texas-based Axiom Space recently masterminded the first privately funded trip to the International Space Station. It is now building the first commercial space station, with accommodation designed by

Philippe Starck. It will be attached to the ISS, before separating when the latter is retired around 2030. axiomspace.com

SPACE PERSPECTIVE

Cape Canaveral-based Space Perspective is the brainchild of Jane Poynter and Taber MacCallum, who met when training for the Biosphere 2 vivarium in Arizona. They’re working on a capsule – they call it a lounge – that will carry eight people to 100,000ft (19 miles) under a balloon. Instead of solid-fuel rockets, weightlessness and G-forces, the six-hour trip will involve two hours of gentle, carbon-neutral floating above 99 per cent of the atmosphere, with a bar and views of the curvature of the earth. The first commercial flights are due to start in 2024. spaceperspective.com

SPACEX STARSHIP

This is the ship Elon Musk plans to take to Mars, and is developing so fast that he’s spooking American regulators. Before Mars, Starship will be taking people to and around the moon. NASA has hired it to land astronauts on the moon as early as 2025, and Yusaku Maezawa, a Japanese billionaire, has already paid for a lunar orbit. spacex.com

THE ORBITE CAMPUS

Orbite is finalising plans in an as yet undisclosed location in the USA. There, with the help of Starck (him again), it will build a luxurious campus with cutting-edge tools for astronaut training. The aim is to open in 2024, but in the meantime more well-catered orientations are planned for 2023. orbitespace.com