

**SPECIAL**

TRAVEL



AN ADVENTURE WITHOUT LIMITS

THE ITALIAN JOB

PARADISE FOUND

OTTOMAN OPULENCE

MODERN-DAY NOMAD

# AN ADVENTURE WITHOUT LIMITS

WHEN APOLLO ASTRONAUT EUGENE CERNAN STEPPED ON TO THE MOON IN 1972, HE INSCRIBED HIS DAUGHTER'S INITIALS IN THE LUNAR DUST. TODAY, IT'S NOT UNIMAGINABLE THAT HIS DAUGHTER MIGHT LIVE TO DO THE SAME - AS A SPACE TOURIST. **LEO BEAR** TRAVELS TO SPACEPORT AMERICA TO DISCOVER HOW THE DREAM IS BECOMING REALITY



For anyone who's looked up at the night sky in wonder, these are exciting times. To date, 557 people have shuttled into space but with the leaps and bounds being made towards commercial spaceflight, that number is set to double within the next 10 years. Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and Tesla CEO Elon Musk are among the tech billionaires with pockets deep enough to build rockets, but in the race for space there is one clear front-runner: Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic.

With 650 'future astronauts' already signed up from 58 countries, the countdown has begun. When fully operational, spaceflights will take place weekly from the world's first purpose-built spaceport in southern New Mexico, an area best known for its production of green chillies and pecan nuts. Until now.

#### OPPOSITE:

*Spaceport occupies 18,000 acres in the Jornada del Muerto desert, New Mexico.*

#### ABOVE:

*The impressive architecture of the Spaceport where one day, 'future astronauts' will train.*

#### PASSION FOR ADVENTURE

Future astronauts will undergo three days of training at Spaceport America before strapping in for the world's coolest rollercoaster ride. They'll be able to gaze at the majesty of Earth from beyond the planet's atmosphere and experience six minutes of weightlessness from a spacecraft as luxurious as any private jet. Six seats, arranged in three rows of two, provide each passenger a window seat on the world - and for added viewing pleasure, glass panels are built into the roof.

Who are these astronauts-in-waiting? According to Jonathan Firth, Executive Vice President of Spaceport and Program Development at Virgin Galactic, they are thrill-seekers, pilots, astronomers, and those for whom the first moon landings made a big impression. "Some have been waiting their whole lives for this opportunity," he says. "Others want the notoriety of being the first person from their country to go into space." Artists and visionaries. Entrepreneurs and poker players. The one thing they have in common? A passion for adventure.

Regular 'milestone' events are organised across the globe to keep the momentum going while the space shuttles go through various stages of rigorous testing. Virgin Galactic's second *SpaceShipTwo VSS Unity* was recently unveiled to cacophonous cork-popping in California's Mojave desert. Another get-together took place at Cambridge University with Stephen Hawkins (a ticket holder) as guest speaker.





**A SLICE OF THE ACTION**

How much does a ticket cost? \$250,000. How long to go? Assuming all goes to plan, it could be within the next 18 months. In the meantime, for space junkies eager for a slice of the action, Spaceport America has introduced the 'Immersion Excursion': a guided tour of its 18,000-acre campus including a sneak peek of Command Centre and Mission Control. For an additional fee, you can land your own private plane on the facility's two-mile-long 'Spaceway' and have your logbook stamped with Spaceport America's 9NM9 identifier.

Surrounded by desert scrubland dotted with juniper trees, cholla cacti and mesquite bushes, Spaceport America's approach is a magnificent one. Chosen for its sparse population, high altitude and 'no-fly zone' status courtesy of the US army's White Sands Missile Range, the whole area is dizzyingly empty. The main terminal, designed by British starchitect Norman Foster, rises from the desert floor like a portal to another dimension.



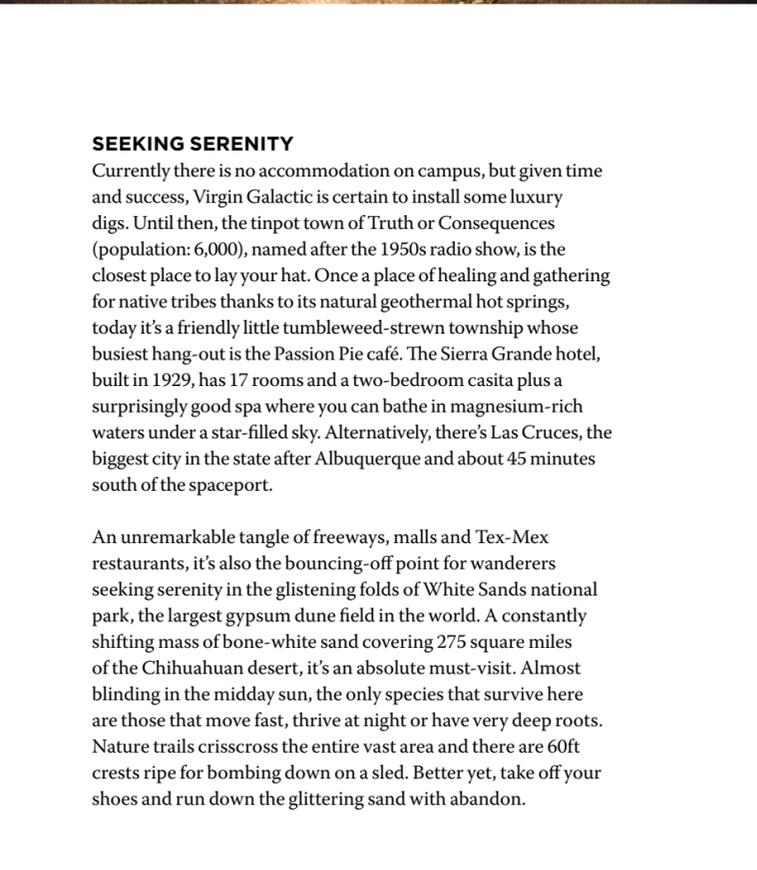
**OLDE WORLDE**

Further outdoorsy pursuits such as off-roading, mountain biking and wildlife-spotting abound in this unsung region of southern New Mexico. Armendaris Ranch and Ladder Ranch, owned by the media mogul and environmentalist Ted Turner, have recently opened their gates for private eco-tours and deliver a magnificent wilderness jolt. Armendaris, the larger of the two, is home to black bears, coyotes and, at the last count, 1.6 million bats occupying a network of giant natural lava tubes. Ladder Ranch, a working bison ranch, is smaller at 245 square miles, and comes with the added advantage of a three-bedroom, prairie-style guesthouse available for exclusive hire.

Delightfully olde worlde and homely, the main house is a pleasure to return to after a day of bouncing around in Polaris Rangers and wading through rivers. Glass cabinets filled with Native American knick-knacks line the walls, thick bison-skin rugs adorn the floors and stuffed quails shot by Turner himself decorate the mantelpiece. On the top floor of the house, there's a powerful telescope set up on a viewing deck. However, a short, steep climb will bring you to the Ladder's hilltop helipad. Away from the glare of city lights and with the frosty calm of the desert descending, it's a splendid position from which to watch the galaxy unfold. What better place to dream of an adventure without limits... ☺

Leo Bear travelled as a guest of Virgin Atlantic, Spaceport America, Visit Las Cruces and Ted Turner Expeditions.

For further advice from Quintessentially's travel experts, please contact: [enquiries@quintessentially.com](mailto:enquiries@quintessentially.com)



**SEEKING SERENITY**

Currently there is no accommodation on campus, but given time and success, Virgin Galactic is certain to install some luxury digs. Until then, the tinpot town of Truth or Consequences (population: 6,000), named after the 1950s radio show, is the closest place to lay your hat. Once a place of healing and gathering for native tribes thanks to its natural geothermal hot springs, today it's a friendly little tumbleweed-strewn township whose busiest hang-out is the Passion Pie café. The Sierra Grande hotel, built in 1929, has 17 rooms and a two-bedroom casita plus a surprisingly good spa where you can bathe in magnesium-rich waters under a star-filled sky. Alternatively, there's Las Cruces, the biggest city in the state after Albuquerque and about 45 minutes south of the spaceport.

An unremarkable tangle of freeways, malls and Tex-Mex restaurants, it's also the bouncing-off point for wanderers seeking serenity in the glistening folds of White Sands national park, the largest gypsum dune field in the world. A constantly shifting mass of bone-white sand covering 275 square miles of the Chihuahuan desert, it's an absolute must-visit. Almost blinding in the midday sun, the only species that survive here are those that move fast, thrive at night or have very deep roots. Nature trails crisscross the entire vast area and there are 60ft crests ripe for bombing down on a sled. Better yet, take off your shoes and run down the glittering sand with abandon.

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:**

Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipTwo on the runway at Spaceport America; The beautiful surroundings of the Jornada del Muerto desert; Exploring the surrounding area in Polaris Rangers; Luxury accommodation available at Ted Turner's exclusive private guesthouse in New Mexico.

