Mars or bust

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Could you go to Mars? Sacrifice everything; friends, family, and (possibly) future in order to be one of the first colonists on the red planet?

Maybe if you were the first to plant a boot print in the dusty red sand, you would have some sort of historical notoriety, but if you're going to be second or third on the surface, please note how history books are not particularly known for remembering the rest of the posse.

The initial excitement, and mere possibility of a Mars venture, is enough to get the average engineer on board with the prospect. In a way, it has become the new lotto-winning hypothetical pitched around dinner parties, pub tables, and cube walls, "If you were given the opportunity, would you go to Mars?" Given the challenges I face in securing a skydiving party each summer, I understand how initial zest quickly transforms into mild enthusiasm that slowly morphs into debilitating fear. Plummeting towards the surface is an amazing experience — with less risk than eating bone-in chicken while watching a horror movie — and yet it seems as though many of the early volunteers are the same individuals who bow out with little grace.

To make history, all you'd need is half a million dollars and a strong constitution. That's all it would take to secure a spot aboard the first space flight to Mars, according to Elon Musk, the billionaire founder and CEO of SpaceX — and benefactor of the many likely deposits to follow. Musk is looking to establish an initial Martian colony of 10 people, with the prospect of creating a city of up to 80,000 — again, not bad (for Musk) at $500,000 a head.

I'll admit to being gripped by the possibility. Upon hearing Musk's intentions, Mars quickly leapfrogged Mexico, Australia, and Albuquerque in my top ten places to visit before I die. My decision to move it up the ranks thus turned my top ten list into a quick seven due to one minor detail: once you depart for Mars, you're never coming back, for better or worse. It's a daunting proposition; some religions have at least tempered the fear of hell by offering the prospect to return, in one form or another, before the clock runs out on eternity.

After the initial excitement subsided and my blinders continued to evade the price tag, I weighed the implications of boarding the massive reusable rocket, never to return.
My first fear: The liquid oxygen and methane that are meant to power the rocket leak, ignite, and I become one cinder among many. Pros: Quick demise, and a financial windfall for family members willing to sell life rights and solicit interviews. Cons: Footnote on SpaceX stock depreciation; cause of family grief/mourning, and life during that one hot minute.

My second fear: My fellow colonists and I reach Mars safely and live a long life producing fertilizer, methane, and oxygen from atmospheric nitrogen and carbon dioxide, as well as subsurface water ice. Pros: Slimmer figure resulting from less gravity, heightened sense of historical significance (pending colonial contribution); and greater sense of purpose resulting from communal living. Cons: Communal living has proven unstable and often results in violent collective disrepair; limited global menu; and homesickness and claustrophobia that would eventually drive me mad – or more mad as you must possess a fair amount of crazy to think the journey was a good idea in the first place.

My many fears aside, colonizing Mars stands as little more than a fascinating hypothetical situation at the moment. However, it has reinvigorated the culture on the importance and wonderment that is space exploration. As a member of a generation that bagged grainy space exploration for high-definition science fiction after the Challenger exploded, I'm excited to return to a time when the possible, and somewhat probable, inspires greatness from imaginative individuals.

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