

# To the moon? Firm hopes to sell \$1.5 billion trips

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- A team of former NASA executives is launching a private venture to send people to the moon for a price that is definitely out of this world.

For \$1.5 billion, the newly formed business is offering countries a two-person trip to the moon, either for research or national prestige. The venture was announced Wednesday.

NASA's last trip to the moon was 40 years ago. The United States was the only country that landed people there, beating the Soviet Union in a space race to the moon that transfixed the world. But once the race ended, there has been only sporadic interest in the moon. President Barack Obama cancelled NASA's planned return to the moon, saying America had already been there.

But the firm has talked to other countries, which are showing interest in going, said former NASA associate administrator Alan Stern, who is president of the new Golden Spike Company. Stern said he's looking at countries like South Africa, South Korea, and Japan.

"It's not about being first. It's about joining the club," Stern said. "We're kind of cleaning up what NASA did in the 1960s. We're going to make a commodity of it in the 2020s."

Stern said he's aiming for a first launch before the end of the decade and then up 15 or 20 launches total.

Dozens of private space companies have started up recently, but few if any will make it - just like in other fields - said Harvard astronomer Jonathan McDowell, who tracks launches worldwide.

Many of those companies hope to follow the success of Space X, which has ferried cargo to the International Space Station for NASA. But more than 90 percent of new ventures will fail before anything is built, he said.

"This is unlikely to be the one that will pan out," McDowell said.

Even though many countries ponied up millions of dollars to fly their astronauts about the Russian space station Mir and the American space shuttles in the 1990s, a billion dollar price tag seems a bit steep, he said.

The latest company is full of space veterans; American University space policy professor Howard McCurdy called them "heavy hitters" in the field. The board chairman is Apollo era flight director Gerry Griffin, who once headed the Johnson Space Center. Advisors include space shuttle veterans, Hollywood directors, former

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House Speaker Newt Gingrich, former U.N. Ambassador Bill Richardson and engineer-author Homer Hickam.

Stern says the company will buy existing rockets and capsules, only needing to develop new spacesuits and a lunar lander.

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