

German flight set to take off with comet tourists

(Reuters) - A German travel agency is selling tickets for a flight to give 88 astronomy buffs a close-up view of one of two rare comets expected to pass Earth this year.

Eclipse Travel, based in Bonn, has joined charter agency Air Partner and airline Air Berlin to organize flight AB1000 on March 16 as comet Pan-STARRS passes through the solar system, 100 million miles from Earth.

The last comet to dazzle Earth's night-time skies was Comet Hale-Bopp, which visited in 1997. Comet 17P/Holmes made a brief appearance in 2007.

The [Boeing](#) [1] 737-700 flight will zig-zag at 11,000 meters (36,089 feet) altitude for the viewing with an Air Berlin spokesman saying only 88 of 144 seats on board filled to ensure all travelers are close to a window.

"If the weather is very good and the air is clear you can certainly see the comet from Earth," Air Berlin's Karsten von dem Hagen, Teamleader Sales Ad Hoc Flights, said in an e-mail to Reuters on Tuesday.

"But at an altitude of 11,000 meters you are most likely above the clouds. The air there is thinner, clearer and cleaner, which enables better observation of the comet."

An astronomy expert will be on board to explain the comet that NASA described as a new comet that should be visible by the naked eye and about as bright as the stars of the Big Dipper as it passes through the solar system this month.

NASA scientists said the comet could send an amazing tail of gas and dust into the night sky but the cosmic show could be less than dazzling if the comet falls apart under the heat and gravitational pull of its plunge toward the sun.

The comet Pan-STARRS, discovered by astronomers in Hawaii in 2011, is the first of two comets expected to pass Earth this year.

The second is ISON, which is forecast to be one of the brightest comets ever seen and could even outshine the moon when it flies by in late November.

Eclipse Travel is selling tickets for the two-hour flight for between \$470 and \$663, according to its website.

(\$1 = 0.7687 euros)

(Reporting by Maria Sheahan, Editing by Belinda Goldsmith)

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