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An Orbiting Hotel to Greet Space Tourists

By Nataliya Vasilyeva

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A possible view from an orbiting hotel: the snow-capped Caucasus as seen from the international space station. **Douglas Wheelock**

A Moscow company has announced an ambitious bid to fill the vacuum in the space tourism market by stationing an orbiting hotel in the cosmos.

Moscow-based Orbital Technologies has sky-high hopes that its planned commercial space station can serve as a tourism hub for well-heeled travelers and offer overspill accommodation for the international space station and workspace for science projects.

But it's unlikely to come anytime soon — the company wants to launch a seven-room station by 2016 but may increase or decrease that capacity based on customer demand.

It also remained unclear whether the state-controlled RKK Energia company, named as the general contractor for the project, would have enough funds and capacities to carry out the

plan. Energia builds Soyuz crew capsules and Progress cargo ships to deliver space crew and supplies to the international space station, which will be the only link to space after the planned retirement of the U.S. shuttle fleet next year.

Sergei Kostenko, Orbital Technologies' chief executive, said in an interview Wednesday that the planned station would be "a comfortable hotel in orbit, designed specifically for tourists."

"But it will be more comfortable than the international space station because there won't be any unnecessary scientific equipment," he said.

Until now, space tourists — a handful of mega-rich CEOs and philanthropists — have had to suffer the indignity of hitching a ride with astronauts and cosmonauts to the international space station and floating around the space laboratory trying not to break anything.

On a commercial space station they would have a place to gawk at the view in private. The design is still being worked out, but some sketches released by Orbital Technologies resemble the international space station.

Orbital Technologies did not disclose the cost of the project or what it would cost for someone to stay at a Commercial Space Station. But it wouldn't be inexpensive, if Canadian Cirque du Soleil founder Guy Laliberte is any indication. In September 2009, he spent 12 days at the international space station for $35 million.

The project will require ample funding, but Kostenko voiced confidence that his company will turn a profit. "Of course, we expect to make profit — this is purely business," he said.

Alexei Krasnov, head of manned space missions at the Federal Space Agency, said the new station could provide a temporary haven for the international space station's crew in case of an emergency or the need for maintenance.

But Jim Oberg, a Houston-based space consultant and expert on the Russian space program, warned that two stations in close orbits would put too much strain on tracking and communications resources on the ground.

Oberg said the new project raises doubts about Russia's commitment to the international space station. Having a new station in orbit accessible to the international space station would allow Russia to undock its modules from the space lab and move them to the new space outpost if it decided to opt out of the partnership, he warned.

"Why Russia would spend the required funds is a compelling question that has significant implications for its future commitment to the ISS — a commitment that NASA has decided to utterly rely on in the absence of U.S. human orbital access," he said via e-mail.

"NASA must focus now on making sure we don't get blackmailed by such threats by eliminating our vulnerability," Oberg added.

All the space tourists who have traveled to the international space station were trained in Russia and sent into orbit on Soyuz capsules, although their trips were organized by a Virginia-based company, Space Adventures.

Laliberte was the last space tourist to travel to the station. Russia halted space tourism this year after the crew size was increased, using the seats in the Soyuz that would have been sold to paying travelers.

Food at the new station would be suited to individual preferences, Kostenko said, and the organizers are thinking of employing celebrity chefs to cook the food before it is packaged and sent into space.

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