



(AERO) SPACE: THE FINAL FRONTIER FOR ALBERTA?

Despite Spar's departure, insiders say
the industry is poised for resurgence

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THIS PAST APRIL, THOUSANDS OF STAR TREK FANS FLOCKED TO the small Alberta town of Vulcan to meet 79-year-old Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played Spock in the short-lived but highly influential television series. The town, which shares the name of the character's home planet, has long exploited this connection for tourism gains, building a spacey tourism centre to draw visitors and, most recently, a bronze likeness of Nimoy. Vulcan's tourism strategy works because space continues to captivate the imaginations of young and old, as it has since Yuri Gagarin orbited the Earth aboard Vostok 1 in 1961.

But the aerospace industry is doing its best to bring the high fantasy of shows like *Star Trek* and other portrayals of science fiction futurism down to earth. Virgin Galactic – the brainchild of business tycoon Sir Richard Branson – is on the verge of bringing space out of the exclusive purview of government-sanctioned missions and into the realm of the private consumer. After creating SpaceShipOne – which became the first private spacecraft to fly above the boundaries of space (100 kilometres above the Earth) in 2004 – Virgin Galactic is now testing SpaceShipTwo. This second craft will fly even higher – 110 kilometres – and has room for a two-person crew and six passengers. The cost of the two-hour flight, which includes six minutes of weightlessness, runs about US\$200,000. Despite the astronomical cost of the trip, hundreds of people have already signed up to be among the first amateur astronauts. >