

When are astronauts not astronauts? When they pay their own way into space, says NASA. But the growing overlap between exploration and adventure travel is redefining both categories.

AUGUST 16, 2021



A rendering shows the view that will be possible from Space Perspective's Spaceship Neptune. (Courtesy of Space Perspective)

Do not call Richard Garriott de Cayeux a space tourist. True, he paid \$30 million to Space Adventures to be launched on a Russian Soyuz rocket to the International Space Station (ISS). But to get to that point, he first co-founded Space Adventures, had an operation to remove a lobe on his liver that was blocked and allowed NASA to map the nucleus of every cell in his eye to see if any changes would occur in space (he had previously had laser corrective eye surgery, which NASA believed might disqualify him for space flight).

Importantly, he also had lined up significant research to conduct while aboard the ISS. "Unfettered by NASA red tape, I believe I had a heavier workload than my government counterparts," he said. But NASA, in concert with the other stakeholders of the ISS, will not designate him or the other six Space Adventure clients as astronauts.

As space (or near-space) becomes more accessible to private citizens after the recent successful flights by Jeff Bezos on a Blue Origin rocket and Richard Branson on Virgin Galactic, the line between exploration and tourism — and who defines what's exploration and what's tourism — threatens to blur.

Whether Garriott de Cayeux is a space tourist or a bona fide astronaut is not merely a question of semantics to him. He's also the current president of the Explorers Club, whose membership is an eclectic and elite collection of academics, adventurers, writers and entrepreneurs. He takes NASA's snub seriously.

...

At the Explorers Club's five-day Global Exploration Summit (GLEX) in Lisbon and the Azores last month, presentations were made by individuals who have walked to the South Pole and traversed the length of Africa. Members heard from leading experts on sharks, bats and narwhals; the professor who discovered the most massive dinosaur species; a man who holds the record for surfing the largest wave; a woman coordinating efforts to prevent the world from being destroyed by an errant asteroid; a TV host who rappelled into the cauldron of an erupting volcano; and the magician David Blaine, who, working with medical professionals, explores the limits of human endurance.



Magician David Blaine, being interviewed by Explorers Club president Richard Garriott de Cayeux. (TW photo by Arnie Weissmann)

And, it turns out, a surprising number of GLEX presenters and attendees have direct involvement with the travel industry. Some give an occasional lecture on a cruise ship, but others are former or current tour operators. Among them was Robin Brooks, director of marketing and public relations for North America for the Adventure Division of Travelopia (which includes International Expeditions, Zegrahm Expeditions, Headwater and Exodus Travel). She said that, during Covid, people took up walking, hiking and cycling in much greater numbers, and that has translated into longer, more adventurous and more challenging trips, up to and including Everest climbs.



Robin Brooks, Explorers Club member, director of marketing and PR, N. America, adventure division of Travelopia

So, to where has the line between adventure travel and exploration moved? When asked for his views on the intersection of tourism and exploration, George Kourounis, host of the television show “Angry Planet,” responded, “It’s not so much an intersection; it’s more like a roundabout.”



George Kourounis, Explorers Club member, rappelled into the cauldron of an active volcano

There’s a gray area, he said. “Exploration is not necessarily doing something that never has been done before. That’s part of it. The spirit of exploration is to do things that *you* ’ve never done before. People want to have this feeling, this sense of adventure, and are looking for interesting ways to meet that need. As someone who found my own niche in that world, I understand the appeal for people to have that thrill.”

On “Angry Planet,” Kourounis enters and documents extreme nature events. But he discovered “that thrill” when he was a tourist, a passenger on a storm-chasing outing looking for tornados. After two tours as a passenger, he got a job driving and guiding for the operator, Cloud Nine Tours, before moving to television.

Still, not all exploration lends itself to tourism. Martin T. Nweeia, principal investigator of Narwhal Tusk Research, wouldn’t bring paying guests on his research expeditions for any price. “We spend so much time earning the trust of the Inuit hunters that we work with, and because that relationship is so delicate and trusted, we need to be cautious about the character and personality of people who are invited to be a part of our team,” he said.



Mario Rigby, Explorers Club member, walked the length of Africa

Some travel companies, however, have found ways to successfully blend tourism with research. Lindblad Expeditions has long brought the two together, often in partnership with National Geographic. (The company’s founder, Sven-Olaf Lindblad, is an Explorers Club member.) In addition to hosting researchers on the same vessels that carry paying guests, the passengers on its expedition ship National Geographic Explorer contribute photos of whales to onboard scientists conducting longitudinal research on killer whales. Guests also have contributed more than 3,700 photos of lichens, mosses and skua scat on South Georgia Island as part of a research-driven, citizen-scientist BioBlitz program.

Exploration leads to tourism (or vice versa?)

Explorers Club member Mead Treadwell sees several direct connections between tourism and exploration. After glasnost blossomed in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, he explored and mapped seldom-visited islands in the Bering Strait and the Arctic Ocean that had not previously been accessible to visitors to the USSR. Using that information, he created and sold “quality wholesale packages” to tour operators for 10 years.



Mead Treadwell, Explorers Club member, mapped islands in the Bering Strait and Arctic Ocean for tour operations

He subsequently became lieutenant governor of Alaska and afterwards served as president of Pt Capital, an Arctic-focused private equity firm with hotel investments in Finland and Iceland.

“Exploration leads to tourism,” he said. And, given his motivation to map the remote islands, the desire to create tourism can apparently also lead to exploration. Treadwell added that when he had worked in a rare book library as a college student, he found that early tourist accounts of visits to certain regions were valued by researchers. “Travelers and explorers are traipsing over the same places, that’s the point,” he said. “There’s still a lot to be discovered.”

Exploring waterworld

Amos Nachoum was the only GLEX presenter who is currently a full-time tour operator. The focus of his Big Animals Global Expeditions is to guide guests on photographic tours that capture images of large, endangered — and sometimes dangerous — animals. Most, but not all, of his tours are underwater or on polar ice.

A former war photographer, treasure hunter and dive boat operator, Nachoum has produced spectacular nature photos. “I want to elevate the adventure travel business to support science and conservation,” he said. He is hoping to raise money to find ways to keep the commercial shipping industry from killing migrating endangered blue whales, a frequent subject of his photography and tours.



Fabien Cousteau discusses the planned underwater exploration lab, Proteus, which will host high-end tourists he called “aquanauts.” (TW photo by Arnie Weissmann)

And Fabien Cousteau, whose family name is synonymous with underwater exploration, spoke at the conference via a video feed. He outlined his plans to build a fixed, underwater exploration lab, Proteus, which he envisions to be the oceanic equivalent of the ISS. His presentation had the ring of an investor pitch (he’s still raising funds), and on one rendering of the exterior, an area was labeled as being for high-end tourists. He called all who would stay in Proteus “aquanauts.”

The final frontier

During my time at GLEX, I met four attendees who had been to space, and one of them, Michael Lopez-Alegria, had gone on the Space Shuttle three times and once on a Soyuz. He’s now the vice president of business development for Axiom Space, which plans to run a commercial space station.

It will offer to accommodate up to three “private astronauts” per mission who will pay “tens of millions” to join the crew in space (the final price is determined by the length of stay). Although conducting research onboard is not a requirement, Lopez-Alegria said that all those who have put down deposits so far have also found meaningful projects to do while in space, and “none want to go just to do somersaults.”

Although they weren't present at GLEX, Explorers Club members Jane Poynter and Taber MacCallum also have plans to bring tourists to very high altitudes — in comfort — aboard Spaceship Neptune, a pressurized capsule attached to a space balloon. Rather than launching into the stratosphere with thrusters, Neptune ascends at a leisurely 12 mph for a six-hour roundtrip, offering 360-degree views and Champagne on demand. (Price: \$125,000; deposits are on a sliding scale, with the first flights requiring higher amounts). Passengers on Neptune will also be passively participating in an experiment about air circulation in the stratosphere that requires that measurements be taken over many trips. Spaceship Neptune is expected to carry its first paying passengers in 2024. Twenty-five flights are planned in the first year of operation, with volume eventually ramping into hundreds annually.

Not all space-related tourism is connected to flight. Danica Remy is president and co-founder of Asteroid Day, an organization focused on calling attention to the possibility of an asteroid hitting the Earth (and to organizing countermeasures).



Explorers Club member Hugo Vau holds the record for surfing the largest wave; Danica Remy is president of Asteroid Day, which aims to prevent a collision between an asteroid and Earth. (TW photo by Arnie Weissmann)

And interestingly, one country, Luxembourg, has recognized tourism potential in the initiative. Every nation wants to be a leader in something, and Luxembourg is “a nation that wants there to be excitement about asteroids.” Remy is working with the director of its national museum on an exhibit about meteorites. Chile, Brazil and Mozambique have likewise organized events around meteors. “I love the idea of countries celebrating rocks in space,” Remy said.

Going underground

Paleontologist Kenneth Lacovara discovered dreadnoughtus, the most massive dinosaur ever unearthed, and earlier was on teams that discovered three other dinosaur species.



Kenneth Lacovara, Explorers Club member, discovered the most massive dinosaur

His intersection with tourism is rooted in the founding of a fossil park and museum, the latter still under construction, in southern New Jersey. When it opens to the public in 2023, the Edelman Fossil Park of Rowan University (where Lacovara is a professor and dean) will feature a “world-class museum” focused on fossils. School children visiting the adjacent quarry get to try their hand at digging for real fossils.

“All kids are explorers, and all can be discoverers,” Lacovara said. “When kids uncover an ancient fossil with their own hands, it’s an authentic discovery. At that moment, they see something that no human has ever seen before, they know something that no human has ever known before. It’s a transformative experience for many, one that has the power to reframe the way they see themselves.”

Words matter

Anousheh Ansari is CEO of the Ansari X Prize, which hands out tens of millions of dollars to innovators discovering commercial solutions to major challenges facing humankind. The first X Prize given, in 2004, went to Mojave Aerospace Ventures, the company that developed and licenses the technology behind Virgin Galactic's SpaceShipOne.



Anousheh Ansari, Explorers Club member, CEO of the Ansari X Prize, astronaut

Ansari, like Explorers Club president Garriott de Cayeux, had also paid Space Adventures tens of millions of dollars to fly on a Soyuz spacecraft to the ISS (and, likewise, is not recognized by NASA as an astronaut). For her, the line between tourist and explorer “is very clear.” Tourists, she said, “pack a bag and get on planes and don't think twice that they may lose their lives. A glass-bottom boat — that's tourism. No one trains for that. But to get into a submersible and go down into the Marianas Trench — you have to prepare for that, you have to have an awareness of your environment. In tourism, you don't.” It seems appropriate that questions about the semantic boundaries between exploration and tourism are still on the mind of Garriott de Cayeux, even 13 years after he returned from space. He finds NASA's refusal to recognize him as an astronaut baffling.



Richard Garriott de Cayeux, president of the Explorers Club, astronaut

“If you pay to go on a cruise ship, no one calls you a sailor. When you board a plane, you're not part of the flight crew. You're a passenger. But if you work on a ship, whether you're a cook or the captain, you're a sailor,” he said, adding that the research he did in space more than justifies the appellation astronaut.

His views on tourist versus explorer are in alignment with Ansari when it comes to early passengers who pay to fly with Blue Origin or Virgin Galactic. Risk, he said, is part of the equation. “People are boarding and trusting their lives on experimental aircraft.” And, therefore, should be designated astronauts.

Virgin Galactic, in a press release, said its crew and paying customers will all be awarded “VG spaceflight commercial astronaut wings.” Those, however, will come from the FAA, not NASA. NASA, Garriott de Cayeux believes, needs to “just get over it.” He points out that not everyone who made sacrifices that led to great accomplishments did so out of an altruistic desire to advance human understanding. “Edmund Hillary just wanted to climb Mount Everest,” he said.