

Bill Rea ? I?m not going to Mars

Those who know me know that I have always been a fan of the space program and space exploration, and I hope I will be until the day of my death.

Like most boys who grew up in the 1960s (and probably lots of girls too), I had dreams of being an astronaut. And I was born early enough that the thought of being the first man on the moon crossed my mind a couple of times. I was only a little put out when the late Neil Armstrong beat me to it.

And I was at the right age at the right time to idolize the likes of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, and accept that the idea of space exploration might be realistic. I was indeed lucky to have been around at a time when imagination in such direction was indulged. But alas, there is also reality.

There are those in our society who speak ill of space exploration, wondering why we bother with it, especially since there are so many problems here at home that need to be sorted out before we turn humanity into a galactic roadshow.

It's a hostile environment beyond the outer stratosphere. Without specialized and meticulously designed equipment, the life expectancy of a person in the conditions that exist away from Earth would be roughly the duration of the average hiccup. It's dangerous out there, as a number of star voyagers have learned the hard way.

I attended a breakfast meeting a couple of weeks ago, at which the keynote speaker was a man who, among other accomplishments, had stood at the summit of Mount Everest, the highest piece of land on Earth.

His endeavour took a lot of time and planning. So does space exploration. If you're entertaining thoughts of getting to the top of Everest, you had better have a lot of money behind you. No one ever said mucking about in outer space didn't gobble up a lot of scratch. There are dead human bodies on the slopes of Everest, and they are likely to stay there. Exploration of outer space has claimed a number of lives.

Climbing Mount Everest is a very expensive, time-consuming and dangerous endeavour.

So why should people want to explore outer space? I think it's got a lot to do with the traditional reason why people give to explain why they would want to get to the top of Mount Everest: Because it's there!

I can think of a lot of other great reasons for space exploration, but that one does just fine for now.

Thus I was intrigued recently when I heard there is a recruitment effort for people to take the first manned trip to Mars.

The project is known as Mars One. According to its website (<http://mars-one.com>), it's a not-for-profit organization with the ambition of establishing a human settlement on that red planet. The effort will use existing and available technology, evidently gleaned from all over the world.

Apparently, the project is accepting applicants from people interested in making the trip, and it's obvious the demands are going to be considerable. Since this will be the first human settlement on Mars, there's going to be an enormous amount of development and upkeep involved. The website is clear (I would say confirmed by common sense) that there are going to be problems that need to be solved, including some that have not yet even been foreseen. This is going to be a job for some exceptionally exceptional people, in terms of intelligence, creativity, physical health and psychological stability, not to mention pure guts (I guess I'm over-qualified).

?Throughout the astronaut selection program, Mars One will select applicants who have good physical and mental health and show five key character traits: Resilience, adaptability, curiosity, ability to trust others and creativity/resourcefulness,? the website says.

So I think it's obvious that getting this expedition to Mars is going to be complicated.

On the other hand, the plans for the trip home are a model of simplicity.

There are no such plans. Not only is it a one-shot deal, it's one way. If you take this trip to Mars, you're going to stay on Mars for the rest of your life (notice I didn't use the words ?earthly existence?).

Those behind Mars One are being very up-front about that.

?A grounded, deep sense of purpose will help each astronaut maintain his or her psychological stability and focus as they work together toward a shared and better future,? the website states.

So would you sign up for a trip like this?

I know there are a lot of people out there who like to see me go, just to get rid of me (I believe there are some regular readers of the Citizen who might submit an application on my behalf). But I'm not planning to seek a spot on this trip, if for no other reason than my wife would never let me go. Besides, I'm pretty sure they're going to be looking for younger people, since it seems like they're looking at some form of colonization. That means they're looking for procreation. It's going to be some years before departure, meaning I'll probably be in my mid 60s at ?blast-off? time. I don't fancy the thought of being the first Martian patriarch.

I grant it seems strange that anyone would sign up for a trip like this, but there is interest. According to a BBC report I read, more

than 30,000 people had put up a 30-euro deposit, which I guess is the start of the application process, by the end of April, and the indications were money was still coming in.

I'm going to assume this project is legit, although the possibility that it might be a scam has occurred to me.

It probably strikes most of us as inconceivable that any relatively young person would sign up for something like this. But maybe we should cast our minds back several hundred years, when men signed up for voyages across a sea when they really didn't know what they were going to bump into. Is it not a fact that Christopher Columbus was trying to get to Asia when he encountered this island on which we reside?

How many young men left their mothers to go on trips to unexplored areas? How many of them opted to spend the rest of their lives in strange lands?

True, that environment wasn't nearly as hostile as outer space, or Mars. But these guys couldn't have known that. For all they knew, those trips could have ended with them falling off the edge of this flat Earth on which we live.

If the human race is going to further explore space, then the effort has to start at some point, and if anyone has a better idea, then let's hear it.

For many years, fiction writers had a lot of fun coming up with stories about Martians invading Earth (Orson Welles scared the hell out of a lot of people in 1938 dramatizing such a happening). Now there's talk about us invading Mars, although the word ?colonizing? is probably more accurate (I'll reserve judgment, for the moment, if that word is also appropriate).

But it is a fact that inhabitants of no other planet, at least to our knowledge, have shown an interest in colonizing Mars. So why not people from Earth?

And why should we be interested in colonizing Mars? For the same reason people climb Mount Everest.

Because it's there

