



LET THERE BE FLIGHT

Always wished you could fly? Mathew Stibbe reports on an exhilarating way to take the weight off your feet

Weightlessness isn't just for spacemen any more. It's become the latest extreme sport. For years NASA, the European Space Agency and the Russians have used converted airliners to simulate microgravity for scientists and astronauts. Now, thanks to a few pioneering space entrepreneurs, anyone can do it.

"Absolutely awesome" is the verdict of Cyril Bennis, former mayor of Stratford-upon-Avon, who took a parabolic ride in a converted Boeing 727-200 over Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in February. "It's like being reborn. You're walking on your feet all your life and, all of a sudden, you're floating like Superman. All around you people are floating, tumbling and enjoying themselves. Not a day goes by when I don't think about my experience."

The operator, Zero-G, adapted the plane to fly a sequence of up to 15 10-mile-long

parabolas. The loss of gravity is like going over the top of a rollercoaster but lasts for up to 30 seconds. Thanks to the plane's stripped and padded interior, you come "back down to Earth" without a bump. The day-long event, which includes instruction by a veteran NASA astronaut and a party, costs £1,965 a head. For £50,000 you can charter the whole plane.

The company has full FAA certification for the modifications required to turn a regular airliner into an airborne adult theme park—a process that took 11 years. Flights operate under the same safety regulations governing commercial airlines such as Delta and United.

Space Adventures, an investor in Zero-G, is the company behind Dennis Tito's and Mark Shuttleworth's \$20m space tourism flights on Russian rockets. For a more modest £4,000 they can send you to the Russian Space Agency

for flights in an Ilyushin IL-76 MDK—part of a five-day training programme at Moscow's Star City. (They also use Zero-G's 727 in Florida.)

Xero is taking the whole thing one stage further by launching its zero-gravity flights from Kiruna, Sweden, using the Russian aircraft. If doing a Tom Hanks in *Apollo 13* isn't cool enough, you can stay in the Ice Hotel too.

You don't need to be super-fit to try this kind of weightlessness. According to Zero-G, if you can ride a rollercoaster, you're good to go, but check with a doctor if you're in any doubt.

The next decade may see 10–20,000 private astronauts lift off for the stars. For now, Zero-G's 727 and the Russian IL-76 offer the closest thing around to the sensation of space flight.

For more information see www.nogravity.com, www.spaceadventures.com and www.xero.se