

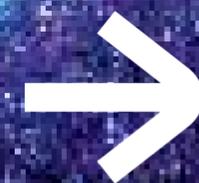


SPACE

HANDS UP WHO
WANTS TO BE
AN ASTRONAUT?
VERA HEADS TO
FLORIDA'S SPACE
COAST TO SEE
IF WE HAVE THE
RIGHT STUFF

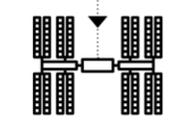
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COWBOYS





EARTH



ISS
250 MILES



MOON
250K MILES



MARS
250M MILES

like Disneyland for nerds: patriotic quotes line the walls; stirring, John Williams-style music booms from speakers; and the grounds are punctuated by enormous – and genuine – rockets. In the Atlantis Center, the Space Shuttle Atlantis, which racked up 307 days in space, is covered in scorch marks from re-entry. It's so close you can almost touch it (NB: do not attempt this). At the Apollo/Saturn V Center you'll find the enormous Saturn V rocket, which fills a football pitch-sized hanger and took the Apollo spacecrafts to the moon, along with some actual lunar rock and all kinds of fascinating space paraphernalia.

Over lunch with Ed Gibson, a spry, 81-year-old ex-astronaut, we get some idea of what we might expect. Gibson spent 84 days in space aboard the Skylab 4 station from 1973-1974. "I was so eager to go my wife said if Nasa didn't send me she would," he chuckles. The key, he tells us, is to concentrate on the tasks in hand, rather than the bigger picture: "In training we did so many simulations, they killed us many times a day, so we learned how to meet any problem that came about." Still, nothing can prepare you for your first EVA (Extra-vehicular activity, or space-walk). "That's a real eye-opener, because you're so used to being inside the space shuttle, when you go outside and take that first step and look down, there's the earth 270 miles below. All of a sudden you realise the danger and, somewhere in the back of >

Left: Space Shuttle Atlantis. **Below:** our writer sizes up the milky way

For a generation that was raised on Hollywood blockbusters – from *Alien* to *The Cloverfield Paradox* and beyond – the desire to be shot into space is as overwhelming as it is unwise. Despite the lure of the infinite unknown, these expeditions almost always end in tears. Or, more specifically, being attacked by rampaging space beasties.

In the real world, the history of space travel is less lethal but no less dramatic. On Cape Canaveral on Florida's Space Coast, the blast-off point for most of Nasa's missions, thousands line the roads to watch each launch. If you time it right, you can even book a surfing lesson with Surfin NSB at nearby New Smyrna

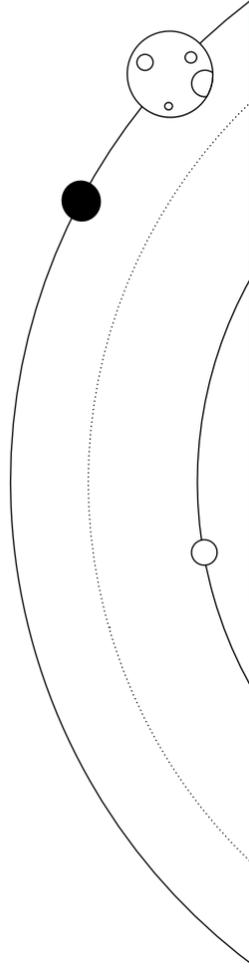
Beach to spectate from the waves. It's not a bad idea to keep your distance: close up, the sound/heat will kill you, and the sonic booms rattle bones/windows for miles.

Although films like *Armageddon* may suggest otherwise, nobody in their right mind would send civilians into orbit. So, armed with only youthful-ish bravado, natty Nasa jumpsuits and an encyclopaedic knowledge of the works of David Bowie, we enrolled in Kennedy Space Center's new Astronaut Training Experience (ATX) to have a go at the next best thing.

We begin with a thorough grounding in the history of space travel. Kennedy Visitor Center is

“I WAS SO EAGER TO GO MY WIFE SAID IF NASA DIDN'T SEND ME SHE WOULD”





Right the Rocket Garden
Opposite
inside the Saturn V
Center



your mind, you're thinking, 'I know Newton was right, but suppose the guy was just a little bit wrong...'"

Space, it turns out, is no picnic. And if it were, the food would be terrible - mostly dried-out stodge rehydrated with recycled urine. Nasa does provide liquid salt and pepper, but it hardly seems worth it given that you've effectively just pissed on your own chips. Colonel John Fabian had it even worse. After releasing a bag of "candy-coloured chocolate" (Nasa doesn't use brand names) to munch as they floated by in zero gravity, he made the rookie error of gulping down a few brown ones before he was informed that the toilet had backed up. On the plus side, astronauts get to see films such as *Star Wars* before they're released in the cinema. And, of course, the views are pretty awesome.

Lunch over, we head to one of KVC's prize exhibits: the world's most realistic launch simulator. We empty our pockets for safety reasons - never an encouraging sign - enter the shuttle, and are strapped firmly



into our seats. As the room lurches back to 90 degrees, we're reminded of Gibson's words: "You're lying there, you count down to zero and all of a sudden the bottom floor of the building explodes!" First, the juddering begins; then, lift-off, which pins our cheeks back with g-force; finally, the roof opens to reveal a tapestry of twinkling stars as heavenly music plays. For a moment, we're not sure if this is space or the afterlife. Luckily it's the former.

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Now we've established the basics, it's time for ATX - the nearest you can get to being a real astronaut. "Going to the moon was just a camping trip," proclaims one KVC film. So our new destination is, gulp, Mars. In a bright, white, *2001*-style room we're set a series of challenges, from the sublime to the ridiculous. The first is an extraordinary VR >



LIFT OFF

Why to keep a distance
from a launching shuttle



400 FT

The mighty heat will kill you



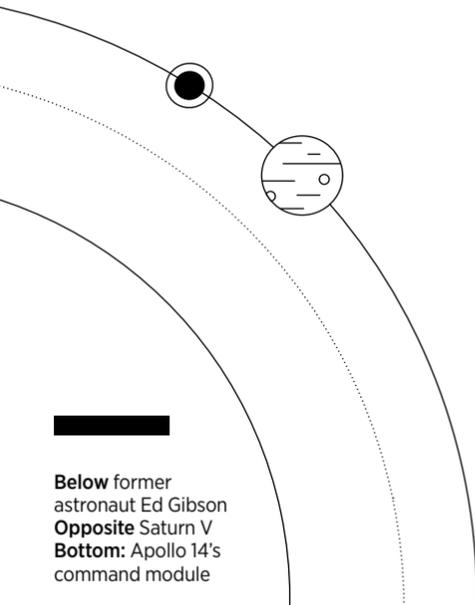
800 FT

The sound will kill you



1200 FT

The alligators will kill you...



Below former astronaut Ed Gibson
Opposite Saturn V
Bottom: Apollo 14's command module



recreation of the surface of the Red Planet. Headset on, we're plunged into a barren purgatory of dust and sandstorms and given basic tasks to perform without freaking out/falling over. Mostly this means scanning rocks like an intergalactic check-out boy, but it's highly convincing, like stepping into Matt Damon's space-boots in *The Martian*. "It was funny watching you step over a box that wasn't there," notes a staff member, wryly. Thanks for that.

Next, we're piloting a Mars landing simulator, with advice from mission control crackling over our headsets. "We haven't had a death in two weeks," jokes the same staffer – although certain members of our team come close. For those manning communications it's like working in a very tense call centre. For those inside the simulator, it's like driving a dodgem car that spins through 360 nauseating degrees. On our turn, we manage to roll the vehicle and crack the windscreen, causing our fittest team member to turn a vivid shade of green. At one point we forget there's a video link and make disparaging hand signals about mission control's competence. "Er, we can still see you," says a disembodied voice disapprovingly. Turns out, in space everyone can hear you do *everything*.

The trick, it seems, is the ability to perform incredibly mundane tasks in terrifying environments. Gibson recalls doing an EVA to fix one of the space station's external life-support systems. "We had these big gloves and no way to restrain ourselves, so one guy was holding my feet and I was thrashing around trying to fix it," he says. "A job that should have taken three minutes took about an hour. When I came back in, my fingernails were all purple, just from squeezing that screwdriver."

Our final task of the day is to fix the air-conditioning units outside a mocked-up space station, while lying back on a gurney. In one sense it's the perfect encapsulation of space travel: essential maintenance work performed in an extraordinary circumstances. In another, it's like doing DIY while strapped to an office chair. We pass the course with rather less than flying colours, and head off to wait for our Nasa call-up – in vain, as it turns out.

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With the technical side covered, it's time to search out those beasties. Gibson, who's actually been in space and therefore wins every argument ever, is certain *something* is out there: "We had this awareness that you could look out and see the earth as just another planet and the sun as



SPACE IS NO PICNIC – AND IF IT WERE, THE FOOD WOULD BE TERRIBLE



just another star, and you always realise there's the potential for other life out there. We haven't detected any yet, but certainly other galaxies out there will be teeming with life, they've got to be."

Under cover of night, we explore the nature reserve that surrounds Nasa on a kayak tour with A Day Away. Amid spooky, shivering mangroves, we paddle out to the aptly named Mosquito Lagoon. As shooting stars ping past, and heat lightning flares in the background, our guides point out Mars – nope, that's a plane – Jupiter, Venus and the Milky Way, among other astral wonders. It's stunningly beautiful, and perhaps the closest correlative to what Gibson and co must have witnessed. Just as remarkable is the bioluminescence in the water caused by millions of micro-organisms. As our paddles skim the surface, it glows like white paint. Beneath us, fluorescent comb jellies (essentially harmless jellyfish) pass by. When our

guide catches some in a jar, they look like tiny xenomorphs, all trailing tentacles and *Alien* anatomies. It's a memorable way to end the trip, but we can't help but wish for a closer encounter with something that's a little more, well, *Cloverfield*.

Paddling back home, the phrase "be careful what you wish for" springs to mind. A stream of leaping mullet break the water, with one landing in the kayak. Further along, an alligator slips silently beneath the surface. And then it happens. Just minutes from shore, a huge, hippo-like creature explodes from underneath our vessel, almost capsizing us. For a second, death seems imminent, but it turns out we've just paddled over a sleeping manatee, and experienced our first ever "manatee rodeo". As it scoots for the shore, we sit there, stunned – and drenched. Let's call it one small step for manatee, one giant leap for mankind. ■ kennedyspacecenter.com

DEAD SPACE?
What to watch out for in each *Cloverfield* film



Cloverfield
An alien with gnashers that can bite off the Statue of Liberty's head.



10 Cloverfield Lane
Forget the aliens – John Goodman's character is the real monster here.



The Cloverfield Paradox
Part horror, part (unintentional) comedy, what is going on here?



Watch **The Cloverfield Paradox** onboard now

Thanks to Hertz, the Courtyard by Marriott Cocoa Beach and SpringHill Suites New Smyrna Beach. visitsnbfl.com; visitflorida.com