



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Who Is an Astronaut?

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As more companies start selling **tickets** to travel into space, people are asking: Who gets to call themselves an astronaut?

It is no longer an easy question to answer. People who are very rich are able to pay to go into space.

Russian space officials have been calling them spaceflight **participants** for many years.

The new supervisor of the U.S. space agency NASA is Bill Nelson. He does not consider himself an astronaut although he spent six days in space in 1986. He was a congressman then.

He told The Associated Press that he believes the term “astronaut” should be for professionals.

Richard Garriott is a computer game developer. He paid a lot of money for his trip to the International Space Station in 2008 on a Russian spacecraft. He hates the term space **tourist**. He said in an email, “I am an astronaut.” He said he trained for two years to go into space.

Axiom Space’s Michael Lopez-Alegria is a former NASA astronaut. He will join three businessmen on a SpaceX spacecraft on a trip to the space station planned for January.

They each paid \$55 million for the trip. Lopez-Alegria said they do not consider themselves space tourists since they will be doing research.

Recently, Axiom Space said there will be a second flight to the space station next year. Peggy Whitson will be on that flight. She is a retired NASA astronaut who has spent 665 days in space.

Whitson will bring John Shoffner. He is a businessman and race car driver from Knoxville, Tennessee. He is also paying about \$55 million. Shoffner said he asked Peggy to make the training difficult for him. He said, "Make me an astronaut."

The word astronaut comes from the Greek words for star and sailor. The idea is easy to market and astronauts appear in movies and popular culture.

Jeff Bezos is the owner of the rocket company, Blue Origin. It will call future **clients** "astronauts." It is selling a place on its first spaceflight with people, planned for July. NASA even has a new term for this kind of trip: PAM for Private Astronaut Mission.

Many individuals want to work as astronauts. More than 12,000 people **applied** to join NASA's upcoming class. Only about 12 will be chosen in December.

But many passengers are expected to travel into space soon. There will be Russian actress and movie director, Yulia Peresild, who will fly to the space station in October. And Japanese businessman, Yusaku Maezawa, will go in December with an assistant to document everything. In each case, there will be a professional astronaut supervising things. But, Blue Origin and SpaceX's spacecraft do not need pilots.

Asif Siddiqi is a history professor at Fordham University and the writer of several space books. He said it might be necessary to retire the term once hundreds if not thousands of people reach space. He questioned, "Are we going to call each and every one of them astronauts?"

Mike Mullane is a retired NASA astronaut. He suggests using astronaut first class, second class, third class. He said this could depend on the person's involvement.

However, Mullane noted, "astronaut is not a **copyrighted** word. So anybody who wants to call themselves an astronaut can call themselves an astronaut, whether they've been in space or not."

I'm Jill Robbins.

Marcia Dunn reported this story for The Associated Press. Gregory Stachel adapted it for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

Words in This Story

ticket – *n.* piece of paper that allows you to see a show, participate in an event, travel on a vehicle, etc.

participant – *n.* a person who is involved in an activity or event

tourist – *n.* a person who travels to a place for pleasure

client – *n.* a person who pays a professional person or organization for services

apply –*v.* to formally ask, usually in writing, for a job, position, training, loan or something similar

copyrighted – *adj.* not allowed to be copied without permission from the author or composer
