



40km

Balloons reach heights of up to 40km and could hang in the stratosphere for two hours

*Ozone layer*

# Fancy hanging out in the stratosphere?

Thanks to one enterprising Spanish start-up and some giant balloons, we could be sipping cocktails in space by next year

Words by Nione Meakin

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fter a series of high-profile setbacks for commercial rocket programmes, a Barcelona-based firm is floating a gentler alternative. Zero2Infinity plans to take passengers to the edge of the stratosphere on helium-filled balloons. Yes, like the ones you get at children's birthday parties. But bigger and not shaped like a Pokémon.

It may sound eccentric, but the idea is not without precedent. The Soviet Union was sending balloonists up into the higher reaches of the atmosphere long before they put a dog in a rocket.

"Balloons are ideal if you want to explore the edge of space or send up satellites but they're not so useful for missiles, so governments stopped focusing on them," explains Zero2Infinity's founder José Mariano López-Urdiales, an MIT-graduate, who also has the European Space Agency and Boeing on his CV. López-Urdiales believes balloons are still

Troposphere up to 10km



Where commercial airlines fly

Sea level 0km

## Mesosphere 50-85km

## Stratosphere 10-50km

### 30km

Past 99% of the Earth's atmosphere

a useful way of floating both satellites and human cargo. "The technology is clean, proven and, above all, safe," he says. "There are none of the explosion problems associated with rockets nor the high-speed re-entry risk. There's no G-force and we don't break the sound barrier."

Zero2Infinity's fleet of 'Bloons', as the company calls their vessels, will gently lift a pressurised pod that's capable of carrying four passengers and two pilots up to 36km above the Earth – three times the altitude of a commercial airliner. It will then hover there for two hours while passengers enjoy cocktails and a view of Earth previously seen only by a select few. It's a famously humbling sight that can lead to an overwhelming shift in perspective on life – what astronauts call the "overview effect".

Passengers will also get to experience the sensation of weightlessness on the descent, which should distract them from the fact that the pod has separated from the balloon and they are now gliding back

down to Earth on a guided parachute.

Almost anyone will be able to travel to space in a Bloon, or at least, anyone who can spare €110,000 (NOK992,000) for a ticket. "We want people to come to us two days in advance so we're sure they're healthy and can do a few basics like equalising pressure in their ears," says López-Urdiales, "but most people will be able to fly, even children."

Already packing your bags? Hold on. Although the company has completed more than 30 test flights with prototypes it has yet to send a human up. It will also need to be given permission to fly from the European Aviation Safety Agency. Still, things are progressing fast and López-Urdiales believes that his company's space odyssey could begin as soon as next year. Here's to that first Cosmos-politan...

[zero2infinity.space](https://www.zero2infinity.space)



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## Space balloons in history



### THE FIRST

Jacques Charles sent up the world's first hydrogen-filled balloon in 1783. It took five days to fill, and was launched from the aptly named Champ de Mars in Paris. It came down just 45 minutes later, 20km away, where it was attacked and destroyed by fearful villagers.



### THE BRAVEST

In 2012 Austrian Felix Baumgartner, jumped from a helium-filled space-balloon at a height of 39km. He broke the sound barrier with his body on the way down.



### THE TASTIEST

Boldly going where no pastry has gone before, a meat and potato pie was sent up in a weather balloon last year. Launched from a UK pub car park, it reached the edge of the stratosphere, before returning intact two hours after lift-off, inspiring countless puff pieces.