

Space Tourists Follows X-Prize Contributor Ansari to Space

In his award-winning film *Space Tourists*, Swiss director Christian Frei follows self-made billionaire Anousheh Ansari—one of the contributors of the X-Prize that launched the race for affordable spaceflight—as she journeys to the International Space Station. Frei tells Popular Mechanics how he got interested in space tourism, what it was like to work with Ansari and about getting around the rules of the Russian government.

By Erin McCarthy

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Anousheh Ansari (Photo Courtesy of Christian Frei Filmproduktionen)

Popular Mechanics: How did you get interested in space tourism?

Christian Frei: I saw a very small article in a Swiss newspaper about a Japanese entrepreneur who wanted to pay \$20 million to fly to the International Space Station in a costume inspired by his favorite superhero. And I was thinking, this is just crazy, he's paying so much money and he wants to dress as a comic hero! But that made me think: Isn't space tourism an age-old dream of mankind? You remember the '50s and '60s, all these fantasies about space tourism, that it would be very soon a reality, that you could take your kids, your wife and your dog and instead of going to the beach, you would go to space. So I remembered all of this and I said to myself, well now it's a reality! I checked it out, and I began to research, and I discovered the hidden side of the space race and the Cold War. All the successes of the Soviets and what is the reality now of the fall of the Soviet Union and why are they doing space tourism?

PM: What was it like to work with Anousheh Ansari?

CF: This is a very special thing, because what happened was, I was already invited to the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. I was waiting to cover the flight, the launch of this Japanese entrepreneur. And three weeks before the launch, he was out of the program due to health reasons. And he was replaced by Anousheh Ansari. It was like she came into my film project from heaven—she just dropped in. So I decided not to contact her, since I already had all the permits to shoot and to cover the preparations for her launch. I felt that she would be surrounded by a lot of media people, that she would be under a lot of stress, and I wanted to wait until she was back on earth. I learned that she was actually covering her flight and her stay at the ISS and I even found some clips on YouTube and it seemed perfect that she was kind of covering the everyday living at the ISS. So I contacted her and explained the project to her, and she was kind enough to give me access to her footage, which was incredible because for the first time you see everyday living up there. Eating and sleeping—things we've never seen before, and she gave me access to this footage.

She's such an incredible protagonist because she had a dream. She was born in Iran, and she would sleep on the balcony of her grandparent's house and gaze up at the stars. And she told her parents, "One day I will be up there. I will go to space." And of course her parents were like, "Yeah, yeah, okay." And 35 years later, after becoming a self-made billionaire, she called her parents and told them, "Guess what? I'm really going!" She really had this dream, and she's so committed, she's an incredible human being.

PM: Was it hard for you to get permits to film everything?

CF: It was incredibly difficult to get beyond the usual access media has. It's probably like this back in the U.S., where you ask for permits and are treated like a journalist and you get a boring press conference. But I wanted the audience to experience this. I'm famous for making documentaries where you are in the midst of everything. That was also my goal

for *Space Tourists*. But the reality was so different at the beginning. I thought, I'll never get close, I'll never get emotions, I will always be behind glass—because, you know, Anousheh was in quarantine. So all the press conferences were her behind glass. It was kind of silly. But because I'm very patient, I got to know the system and the people and finally we got behind all that and got access. If you watch the film, for example, when Anousheh is putting on her spacesuit three hours before launch, I am like 1 meter from her and the only cameraman in the room, and it's a very intimate situation. And what struck me was that she was so happy, so incredibly happy that this is her day. A little bit of fear, I think, would have been more normal in this situation, it seems to me. But she is smiling from her heart.

PM: I'm not sure I'd put myself in that little rocket and go up to space.

CF: Soyuz is such a tiny capsule; you see that in my movie. It is *not* the comfortable spaceship everybody envisioned in the '50s and '60s. It's a 45-year-old system, which is very reliable and beautiful, but it looks old-fashioned and not at all like the future.

PM: You juxtaposed Anousheh's journey with the story of these scrap-metal collectors on the ground. Why did you decide to do that, rather than just focusing on her?

CF: Because I'm a documentary filmmaker. If I did a film about a roller coaster, I would not just film the passengers and their fears and happiness on the ride. I would also want to film the system, the workers, what the economy of this thing is. And that's the reason why I wanted to go beyond the usual approach. When I learned that there are Kazakh people making a living off of falling space-rocket boosters, I said, "This is amazing!" First of all, it's good that these things are recycled, but I imagine: You go into the steppe and you wait for something falling from the sky, because there's no trees there, there's nothing. And indeed, when I went there and researched, that was exactly the situation. We went hundreds of kilometers out into the middle of nowhere, where there's no hills, no streets. There is nothing. It's just an incredibly flat landscape. And you go there with these *huge* Russian trucks, they look like dinosaurs. And once you're there, you stand there and watch your watch, and you look upward when it's time for launch, and BOOM! There's the sound, and you see these things fall down, and you're very close, a few kilometers away.

PM: Were you at all afraid that something was going to fall on your head?

CF: No, I'm not afraid. The chance of being hit is very small.

PM: How big are the rocket boosters?

CF: It depends. The first stage is four boosters, and each of these four boosters is 20 meters. And it's 3 tons of aluminum, each booster.

PM: What would you say was the biggest challenge when you were making this film?

CF: The biggest challenge was actually to film these sequences with the scrap-metal collectors. People tell me after the screenings, "These are just incredible, we felt like we were in outer space because the things that are happening are so strange." But it was so difficult because the Russian authorities, they let me research the whole thing, but then all of a sudden they told me, "You can film, but you're not allowed to film these alcoholics"—their word—"we want to stage the work of the collectors with our secret service and soldiers putting on overalls"—which the collectors never do—"and helmets and gloves." And I was like, "What?! This is not reality. This is not how it really happens." And they said, "Yes, we know, but that's how we want it to be filmed." This is the Russian way of dealing with the media. It's the good old Communist tradition. They tell you how to present something, and if you argue and say, "This is not like that," they say, "It's true, it's not like that, but that's the way we want to be presented. And if it's not that way, you can't film it."

So I said no to this offer, because this is against my ethical principles. It took me one year to reorganize everything. With the help of Google Earth, we went into this steppe, which is *huge* and there are no roads, but there are tiny tracks of these trucks. And you can see them in Google Earth. So my assistant made hundreds of printouts, and we put together a huge map so I could orient myself, and I found a way of approaching from the south. Everybody thought we were coming from the north. And finally I could film these sequences without any problem. But it took one year.

PM: And the Russian government didn't know you were doing this?

CF: They knew. We stayed 4 kilometers out of the Russian territory and they knew we were there, but they couldn't do anything. We could really film without any problem. This is why it takes me three years to make a film. It's why I'm so slow. I think a normal reaction, often, would be to just stop, to say, well, this is too hard. But I want to go beyond the usual film and TV coverage and rocket launches. The launch of a rocket is not good enough. I wanted to do something more.

PM: Did you ever consider maybe including the work of Burt Rutan and others in the U.S., who are trying to make spaceflight affordable for everyone?

CF: I mentioned it a little bit in my film, since Anousheh, my protagonist, was one of the first sponsors of the X-Prize, which was called the Ansari X-Prize. She triggered this new space race, which was actually won by SpaceShipOne by Burt Rutan, and now they're constructing SpaceShipTwo, and they're almost ready for commercial launches. But I didn't want to go too deeply into that, because I felt it was another story.

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