

## A ticket to Mars

By [James Cameron](#), Science Editor (2012/13)

Tuesday 1 May 2012

How would you like the next ticket to Mars? Well, that's the dream of billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk. Billed as the inspiration for Robert Downey Jr.'s Iron Man character, Musk made his millions with PayPal, before sinking his fortune into realising some of his dreams. He set up Tesla Motors, the purely electric car company behind the Tesla Roadster, and Space X, a private space company. Tesla Motors was the first to accelerate the transition to electric vehicles and to prove that an electric car can actually be "better than a gasoline powered" car, and to bring commercial space transit to the masses.

In order to do this, he has set about applying the mindset of a start-up company to these challenges: prototyping quickly, failing often in the early stages, whilst failing has few consequences, in order to work out the most effective way of solving problems.

One of the hopes of the company is to level the playing field away from Russia's current monopoly on human space travel, and open space to all those who can afford a ticket.

NASA has awarded Space X a \$1.6 billion contract over the coming years to provide the International Space Station with supplies for a minimum of 12 missions, going up to \$3.1 billion for additional missions if required. This contract will be fulfilled using the combination of Space X's own rocket, the Falcon 9, and the Dragon Capsule.

The Dragon Capsule represents the peak of Space X's technological innovation, designed to be capable of handling either six thousand kilograms of cargo or seven astronauts. Importantly it is capable of accommodating those up to 6' 5", unlike NASA's original Mercury capsule missions which limited the astronauts height to 5' 11".

It is also reusable, an important feature to bring the costs of space travel down to a manageable figure, and reducing the costs of space travel to those similar to airline's costs, i.e. maintenance rather than the construction of disposable vehicles. It has already managed a trip into orbit and back, a feat which until then had only been accomplished by government funded organisations.

Tests beginning later this summer are the first of three that will assess the Dragon Capsule's ability to rendezvous with the ISS and if these are successful, it will be the day when the first private company pioneered the way into space.

If all that wasn't enough to convince you that Musk has vision, maybe this will. Musk has plans to send a mission to Mars within the next two decades, and later establish a self-sustaining colony, and begin sending people there soon after.

And with his track record, it isn't entirely unbelievable.



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