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## ASTRONOMY

Space tourism explores a different role in science

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By Kenneth HICKS



For your next vacation, how about a trip to the International Space Station?

In April 2007, that's exactly what billionaire Charles Simonyi did, at a cost of about \$20 million. He talked recently about his adventures at Ohio University's Frontiers in Science lecture series.

Simonyi is the fifth space tourist to fly to the station via a Russian Soyuz rocket. The first space tourist was Dennis Tito, who went up in April 2001. Two other private citizens are booked for flights this year and next, assuming all goes well for the Soyuz program.

Simonyi recounted his experiences in a blog, <http://blog.charlesinspace.com>. Space tourism is not for the faint of heart -- a substantial amount of training is required, and any number of things could go wrong at any time. Even a billionaire cannot summon a space tow truck to fix a malfunctioning spacecraft.

Simonyi was asked after his lecture about the role of humans in space and whether it affects our scientific understanding of the cosmos.

Simonyi was clear in his opinion that virtually all scientific knowledge beyond the Earth-moon system has come from telescope observations and robotic probes. Simonyi said that we send people into space for adventure and to learn more about the considerable hazards of space travel, not to learn about astronomy.

This was a refreshingly honest assessment.

Simonyi also is a philanthropist and has donated \$20 million toward the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, among other projects. The telescope will survey the entire sky every three nights, looking for new supernovae and Earth-crossing asteroids, for example.

The project will provide unprecedented new information about our universe.

Both observational astronomy and the human-space program are useful, each in its own way. As a philanthropist and space tourist, Simonyi has contributed to both.

Kenneth Hicks is a professor of physics and astronomy at Ohio

University in Athens.

[hicks@ohio.edu](mailto:hicks@ohio.edu)

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