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What a blast! The rush of amateur astronauts



In this file photo William Shatner speaks onstage during the World Premiere of *Batman vs Two Face* at the 2017 New York Comic Con - Day 4 in New York City. — AFP

With veteran actor William Shatner-Captain Kirk of "Star Trek" fame-becoming the latest celebrity to go into space Wednesday, we look at the recent rush of amateur astronauts.

Beam me up, Bezos

Shatner is going where no 90-year-old has gone before aboard Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin rocket. The Canadian will become the oldest person ever to go into space on the flight, beating pioneering female pilot, Wally Funk, 82, who also flew with Bezos in July. Shatner will experience a few minutes of weightlessness 60 miles (100 kilometers) from Earth, before returning in the reusable rocket. Bezos

and his brother Mark were also on Blue Origin's maiden mission in July.

Russian first

Last week Russian actress Yulia Peresild blasted off to the International Space Station with a film director to try to pip the United States in making the first feature film in orbit. They want to best "Mission Impossible" star Tom Cruise who announced his own movie project with NASA and Elon Musk's SpaceX last year. They hope to wrap their story about a female surgeon who is dispatched to save a cosmonaut by the time they touch down on Sunday.

Three-day trip

SpaceX sent US billionaire Jared

Isaacman and three of his guests into orbit for three days last month. It was the first time Musk's outfit blasted non-professionals into space.

Space Station holiday

Axiom Space are sending three businessmen to the International Space Station for a 10-day stay in January in the first of three trips aboard SpaceX rockets. Musk is also handling an orbital voyage organized by Space Adventures for four paying clients next year.

Fly me to the Moon

Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa is due to take a trip around the Moon, possibly in 2023, aboard another SpaceX rocket in a mission called

dearMoon. He hopes to take eight amateurs with him on the first civilian lunar mission and has already invited "La La Land" and "First Man" film director Damien Chazelle. Chazelle says he will have to ask his wife.

Virgin troubles

Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson took part in a test flight of its rocket-powered spaceplane in July. But it has since been grounded over a "mishap" and the company that made the early running in space tourism hopes to resume flights next year. — AFP

'Lupin' star Omar Sy signs multi-year Netflix deal

Omar Sy, the star of Netflix global smash hit "Lupin" about a French gentleman thief, has signed a multi-year deal to develop films for the streaming giant, the company said Tuesday. The debut of the French-language TV mystery is Netflix's third most-watched season ever after "Squid Game" and "Bridgerton," earning 76 million views in its first month, according to internal figures. A second batch of episodes was released in June, with more eagerly awaited adventures based on the early 20th-century cat-and-mouse novels of Maurice Leblanc to follow.



In this file photo French actor Omar Sy performs on stage during a reading of 'Frere d'ame' by David Diop, as part of the Avignon Theatre festival, in Avignon, southern France. — AFP

The deal announced by Netflix did not specify any financial terms or specific projects for the deal with the actor-comedian who is set to star in and executive produce multiple feature films. It is the first such Netflix deal with a French talent or filmmaker, according to Variety. Sy said he was "very happy to have the opportunity to extend the relationship" with Netflix, praising the streamer's "collaboration with artists and their passion to bring unique and diverse stories to homes all over the world." "We look forward to working together with Omar and his team as he grows as a producer and brings more unique stories and voices to Netflix," said Netflix France's Gaëlle Mareschi in the statement. — AFP



A tourist swims in a swimming pool at a hotel in Tunisia's resort town of Hammamet, about 66 kilometers south of the capital Tunis. — AFP photos



This picture shows a view of empty sunbeds and shades along a beach in Tunisia's resort town of Hammamet.

Tunisia, Morocco hoteliers eye an end to COVID downturn

The October sun warms the sands of Hammamet beach on Tunisia's east coast, but the coronavirus pandemic still casts a shadow and visitor numbers are yet to bounce back. After two ruined seasons in a row, operators in Tunisia and Morocco are licking their wounds and hoping the lifting of travel restrictions will spell better days. This year was better than the last, "which was really a terrible season. But (2021) was still only half as good as 2019," said Haykel Akrouf of the Bel Azur hotel.

The luxury facility, with swimming pools overlooking rows of deckchairs along the shore, had to halve its capacity of 1,000 beds in July as a spike in coronavirus cases battered Tunisia. The country found itself on European nations' red lists, making it virtually impossible for holidaymakers from major markets including France, Germany and Italy to visit. But as restrictions have begun to ease, some have managed to reach the North African country. Elena Bakurova flew in from Vladivostok in the east of Russia to celebrate her 44th birthday and "discover Africa".

Yanis Merabti, from France's Lyon,

said he had chosen a holiday in Tunisia for the price and the weather. "France isn't like this in October. You can't get to the beach or enjoy the sun, it's cold," he said. "It's so nice here." Akrouf said the hotel was at around 30 percent capacity, with Russians making up roughly half that number. "We are talking about survival-it's nowhere near profitable," he said.

'Catastrophic'

Dora Milad, head of the FTH hoteliers' association, said the "catastrophic" 2020 season had battered the sector, with hotel stays down by 80 percent. This year saw an 11 percent uptick, she said. "That's very slightly better... but it's still far from normal." In a good year like 2019, Tunisia registers about nine million hotel stays, and the tourism sector accounts for up to 14 percent of gross domestic product-providing livelihoods to around two million Tunisians. Nearby Morocco also depends heavily on visitors to its coastal resorts and historic inland cities.

This season saw a modest influx of tourists when the country reopened its

borders in June following months of closure. Roughly 3.5 million visitors had entered the country by the end of August-up from 2.2 million the year before. But that is still far short of the 13 million registered in the same period of 2019. Facing its own spiking COVID-19 caseload, Morocco was forced to impose new restrictions, such as limiting travel to the tourist hot spots of Marrakech and Agadir. "The recovery has been focused on the coastal cities, but it has been slowed down by the restrictions imposed in August," said Hamid Bentahar, the president of the country's tourism federation. In neighboring Algeria, the sector depends largely on domestic tourism, also hit hard by the pandemic. National Hoteliers' Federation chief Ahmed Oulbachir said facilities were operating at just a quarter of their normal rate.

'Unexploited' sites

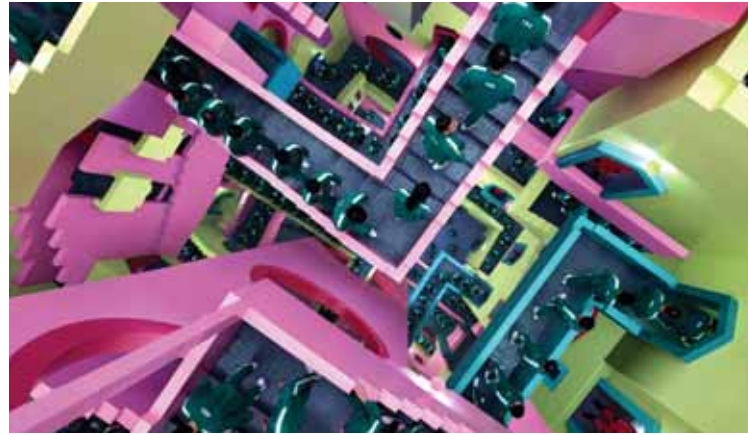
Tunisia has seen its coronavirus cases tumble since their mid-year peak, and finally has had some good news on the tourism front too. Key markets the UK and France have both removed the country-along with Morocco and Algeria-

from their travel red lists. For the Bel Azur, "it's already too late," said Akrouf. "But at least it lets us save the 2022 season, as we can sign contracts with tour operators." Hotels in Hammamet are now preparing for a recovery. But Akrouf says it is time to rethink the sector beyond the cliches of "camels and the beaches". "Mass tourism has shown its limits. It's time to make use of magnificent sites that are totally unexploited," he said. Milad of the Tunisian hoteliers' association agreed.

The sector has "sat on its laurels" since the 1960s and failed to fully exploit country's desert south, spectacular interior and the ancient ruins of Carthage, near Tunis, she said. She also pitched the capital Tunis as a destination for weekend city escapes. Since the start of the last century, "Tunisia has been a destination for winter breaks in the sun, and to treat lung conditions," she added. "That could be an opportunity, after COVID, to regenerate and get out in the fresh air." — AFP



In this photo a large digital screen on a building displays the logo of Netflix, producers of the South Korean hit series 'Squid Game', beyond a South Korean flag hoisted above a pavement in Seoul. — AFP photos



This handout image Courtesy of Netflix shows a scene of South Korea's 'Squid Game' Season one.



Participants take part in an event where they play the games of Netflix smash hit "Squid Game" at the Korean Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi.

'Squid Game' becomes Netflix's biggest-ever launch hit

Dystopian South Korean drama "Squid Game" has become Netflix's most popular series launch ever, drawing 111 million fans since its debut less than four weeks ago, the streaming service said Tuesday. The unprecedented global viral hit imagines a macabre world in which marginalized people are pitted

against one another in traditional children's games. While the victor can earn millions in cash, losing players are killed. Spreading around the world by word of mouth, especially via social media, "Squid Game" has topped Netflix charts in more than 80 countries.

"Squid Game has officially reached 111

million fans-making it our biggest series launch ever!" tweeted Netflix. By comparison, Regency romp "Bridgerton" reached 82 million households on debut, using Netflix's internal metric which includes any account that watched an episode for at least two minutes. The success of "Squid Game" amplifies South Korea's increas-

ingly outsized influence on global popular culture, following the likes of K-pop band BTS and Oscar-winning movie "Parasite." It is also the latest success for Netflix's bid to produce more international and non-English language content. The streamer's third most-watched series debut for France is French-language "Lupin."

Netflix offers "Squid Game" in both dubbed and subtitled versions in multiple languages, expanding its potential audience. In February, the world's most popular streaming platform announced plans to spend \$500 million this year alone on series and films produced in South Korea. — AFP



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