

Out of this world

New attractions take the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex to cosmic levels, finds Kelly Ranson



You need to teleport yourself to the box in front of those space rocks and then look in the box, pick up the disc with three lines on it and return it to the Mars rover, which is to the east of you," says my travel companion, who is giving me crucial instructions during my 'mission on Mars', which I am taking very seriously.

But of course, I'm not on Mars. I'm on Florida's Space Coast, at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex's Astronaut Training Experience (or ATX, as it's known) and I'm using a VR headset to complete my mission. Through very clever simulation technology,

visitors over the age of 10 can experience the training to get a small glimpse into the world that astronauts live and breathe. While ATX is not included in the general daily admission ticket (\$75 per adult/\$65 per child plus tax), guests can buy ATX 'add-on' experiences for as little as \$30 per person.

Space exploration has taken off in recent years. Nasa, for one, is forging ahead with its Artemis programme, meaning rocket launches to the moon will become reality once again in the next couple of years.

The Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex (KSCVC) is also embracing the future of space travel, and just last year

Kennedy Space Center
Rocket Garden

PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCK/ALIGHTY/VOX

3 MUST-SEE EXHIBITS

Gateway: The Deep Space Launch Complex

Take a flight with Spaceport KSC

This is by far the standout attraction. Head to the departure gates of the future and prepare to board one of four simulation flights: Cosmic Wonders, Daring Explorers, Red Planet or Uncharted Worlds. Once strapped into your seat, the giant screens will come to life, with plenty of special effects, and transport you out of this world.

Explore the SpaceX Falcon 9 Booster

As you enter Gateway, you won't miss the huge SpaceX booster, which is suspended above. You can learn all about the rockets currently going into space and look closely at this Falcon 9 booster, which has flown into orbit twice.

Step into the spacecraft

Want to know just what the latest spacecrafts look like inside? Step aboard a full-scale mock-up to see where astronauts live and work and how they use all available space in zero gravity.



ABOVE: Treasures Gallery housing artefacts from Apollo missions
BELOW: Kelly Ranson meets veteran astronaut José Hernández



agent tip

"Get there early, then take the KSC Bus Tour through Nasa's restricted areas to the Apollo/Saturn V Center. Return to the main complex at your leisure, and prioritise seeing Space Shuttle Atlantis, Gateway and the Spaceport KSC journeys. Don't forget to hit up the world's biggest space shop too!"

Theresa MacPherson,
sales team member,
AttractionTickets.com



opened its new attraction, Gateway: The Deep Space Launch Complex. It is full of space exploration artefacts: visitors can see the spacecraft of today and learn about the innovations being made to prepare for deep space travel to planets such as Mars.

Entering Spaceport KSC to board my own 'spaceship' on a mission to deep space through an immersive simulation ride was certainly another highlight. Having to choose between four journeys, I decided on Red Planet, for an action-packed adventure to Mars. From blast-off to landing, the special effects and visuals make for a thrilling four-minute trip.

Heading back to Earth and the present day, KSCVC is celebrating the 10th anniversary of its Space Shuttle Atlantis exhibit this summer. I've had a fascination with space since I was young, so to see the iconic shuttle in real life was a moment I'll remember forever.

Aspiring young space cadets – and adults who are big kids at heart too – can have plenty of fun with the new All Systems Are Go attraction, which launched earlier this year. The Peanuts characters – Snoopy, Woodstock, Charlie Brown and pals – take to the stage for a fun and educational performance for kids. Thanks to clever puppetry, special effects and an interactive smartphone element, the entertaining show brings the history of Nasa and the current Artemis launches to life.

"The Space Bar, which is perfect for space-themed cocktails, including the tequila-based Skyrockets in Flight

For visitors feeling inspired from all the space talk, a chat with an astronaut is just the ticket. Each day, a veteran Nasa astronaut is at the park to interact with guests. I was lucky enough to meet José Hernández, who flew to the International Space Station in 2009. When I asked him if had any hesitation ahead of his space flight, he quite simply said: "Nope, none at all."

There's so much to see at KSCVC and it's well worth spending a few days in the area away from the larger crowds of Orlando. The new Courtyard by Marriott Titusville Kennedy Space Center is the closest hotel to the park. It has a fantastic rooftop bar, The Space Bar, which serves space-themed cocktails, including the tequila-based Skyrockets in Flight, and has a prime viewing spot for rocket launches.

Additionally, if you have clients looking to extend their stay, suggest a few days in Cocoa Beach – the East Coast Capital of Surf. With miles of golden sand, it's the

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ABOVE: Ride the waves with the School of Surf in Cocoa Beach

ideal place for lazy days relaxing, or they can head to the nostalgic pier to enjoy fresh seafood.

During my time in Cocoa Beach, I made sure to maximise the outdoor adventures on offer, starting with a surfing lesson with the School of Surf. Given that it's also the hometown of surfing legend Kelly Slater, it was a must – and it's great for any age or ability.

Then there's a bioluminescence eco-kayak tour where, during the summer months, you'll see the lagoons quite literally glow with every paddle stroke, thanks to organisms that react to movement

in the water, emitting a wonderful shimmering light.

While there are dining options aplenty in Florida, don't miss trying local, independent restaurants. The team at Village Food Tours in quaint Cocoa Village (15 minutes from Cocoa Beach) offer a walking food tour of the historic neighbourhood, with stops in four eateries for tasty cuisine such as Mexican and Thai.

The Space Coast is the perfect beachside spot to relax after racing around the parks and is just 45 minutes away. And you never know, if you time it right, you may even witness a rocket launch. **TW**

BOOK IT

Jetset offers a 10-night holiday, with three nights at the Courtyard by Marriott Titusville Kennedy Space Center on a room-only basis, and seven nights at the Hampton Inn Cocoa Beach on a B&B basis, from £999 per person. The price includes return flights with Tui from Gatwick to Melbourne Orlando airport and one-day admission to the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, based on departure dates in October.

jetsetflights.co.uk

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Enhancements

GATEWAY

ASTRONAUT TRAINING EXPERIENCE
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KSC EXPLORE TOUR
With a space expert as your guide, tour America's multi-user spaceport and make stops along the way.

CHAT WITH AN ASTRONAUT
Sit down in a casual, small group setting, enjoy a sampling of food and beverages, and ask a NASA astronaut your most pressing questions. Chat With an Astronaut is offered twice daily at 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM.



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