

SCAMMED

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Surfing the web when bored and having nothing else to do is, depending on your viewpoint, a growing world problem, or a pastime for nerds like me. It is extremely addictive. I have not had a date in more than six months, and I really like the dark cave-like room where my computer is set up. No worries about skin cancer, right?

Once, I Googled for God. Out of curiosity, I wanted to see what would come up. The word "God" gave some 566,000,000 results after only 0.05 seconds. Wow! God is really popular and fast. However, no matter which entry I clicked on, or even assisted by my copy of the O'Reilly® Google Pocket Guide, I never found his home page. Could God be computer illiterate? Has God not paid the fee to his ISP? Has God's server crashed? However, I did find that the domain "iamgod.com" was for sale. I thought about buying it, but then people might ask me to perform miracles. Miracles? I have a hard enough time just getting out of bed. The water to wine thing was cool, but that is not my bag. I am a dark beer guy.

Recently, in another moment of boredom, I typed, "space travel" to see what would come up. There were some 158,000,000 "hits," almost as many as for God. Could I narrow this down? Were there any space travel agencies? I typed, "space travel agency". Yes, a bunch of them; mainly Russians ran them. Seemed like millionaires with excess cash want to go into space.

Hmmm, here was one that did not look like any Russians ran it:

<http://www.quarkspacetravel.com>.

Let's see what's there.

What a sloppy web page! Looks like someone used "Building a Web Page for Idiots."

Moon Voyages

Buy Tickets!

One-way \$8.50 --- Round-trip \$20.00

No Visa, No Master Card, No PayPal

Only USPS Money Orders accepted.

The Moon photography was spectacular, must be NASA stuff. The screen displayed an example of the ticket. A fancy *I've Been To The Moon* T-shirt, with the Moon's crater-pocked face on it, was included with the round-trip fare.

For me, an experienced web surfer, I knew this had to be a scam. Nevertheless, I fell for it. It was just too wacky; anyway. I liked the T-shirt. Maybe that's what it's all about, just a way to sell T-shirts. Therefore, off to the Snail Mail Office I went for a money order and sent it to the address indicated.

Ten days later, a package arrived with the T-shirt, the round-trip ticket and tour instructions:

Be in front of your apartment or house for pickup on August 12 at 1:30 AM. Pack sufficiently for an overnight stay. We will provide courtesy meals and beverages. Bring anti-nausea medicine if you feel that you might need it.

If this was for real, it sounded like fun! Must be some sort of new fad like everyone gathering together in a town square in Europe, pulling out your cell phone and yelling "boogie" into it along with thousands of others doing the same thing, then leaving. Hey, I was up for it!

I wasn't sure how to dress, but I thought that an all-black look would be great. Moreover, my old Star Trek T-shirt still fit and wasn't too faded. I threw in a well-worn jeans jacket. What

the hey, I even decided to wear the old Tom Corbett Space Cadet badge that my granddad gave me.

So there I was at 1:45 AM, feeling like a real bonzo. Nothing! Just standing on the curb looking up and down the street. They said 1:30 AM. I knew that someone was videoing me.

Scammed!

Turning to go back into my apartment, I heard a deep-throated rumble. A long black bus with darkened windows pulled around the corner, blinked its lights and stopped in front of me. There was no sign or lettering on the bus. A blue-uniformed driver with a black beret and tie opened the door, took my bag and placed it underneath the bus.

I walked to the middle of the bus and took a seat, among a crowd of chattering and excited people. All were asking each other what was going on. *This was neat!*

We left town and arrived in a sparsely populated rural area in approximately an hour and a quarter, pulling up to a tall, windowless, circular, almost silo-like, gray building. There were other buses parked outside. We stopped and got out in the still damp dark.

Another uniformed individual, dressed in a manner similar to that of the bus driver welcomed us and led us inside. We passed down a long hallway and through motion-activated glass doors into a well-lighted waiting room. Many other people were there, perhaps 400. I spied a courtesy bar and a table with coffee, juices and pastries.

Just as I was sitting down with my coffee and a small ham and cheese croissant, there was an announcement.

“Please check your tickets for a large red number. This is your boarding sequence number and your seat number. Please board as your number is called.”

I was number 324. When my turn came, I moved through the boarding door and into a small elevator with 50 or so others. Down we went, perhaps 200 feet. It achieved that illusion.

I began to understand that this was some sort of entertainment program. However, it was new to me, and I was aware of industry developments of this sort.

The elevator opened and we walked down a featureless hallway to an open airplane door. A cavernous area with rows of seats was our first view. Stewardesses directed us to our seats. I eventually found seat 324, way in the back.

It looked like a very wide airplane, with large windows on the sides, darkened.

The seats were different from those of a regular airplane. They were heavily padded and each considerably separated from the other. I slipped into the seat, equipped with waist and chest straps. My head and arms rested in slight depressions. I followed video instructions for belting in.

I introduced myself to a tall thin guy sitting to my right.

Bob said, "Isn't this the craziest thing you have ever seen?"

"Well, I am sort of astounded by the effort they have gone to set all this up. Do you have any idea what company is developing this? Is it Disney? Or perhaps that British Virgin Airlines guy, what's his name?"

"You mean Sir Richard Branson. No, I have no idea. A friend came across it on a web site and forwarded it to me. So, I said, OK!"

The seats rotated 90 degrees, so that we were lying on our backs.

Ceiling speakers crackled:

"Prepare yourselves for blast off. Breathe quietly and avoid unneeded exertion. If you feel nauseous, please ring for a stewardess after we are in space. The time is 4:07 AM."

This is sure cool. What an entertainment idea!

There was a pause of 45 seconds, then a slight rumble. We didn't seem to be moving, except for a few bumps and doors clanging. Then it was quiet, with a deep vibration. Slowly and with increasing pressure, our bodies pushed into the seats.

After an extended period the pressure stopped. People were laughing at the effect on them. *This was great!* I looked out; the windows were still dark.

We stayed strapped in for the duration of the flight. However, it felt like I was floating a bit. *How did they achieve this effect? These guys are going to earn a bunch doing this. What an illusion. However, why was it so cheap? Guess it was an early product test, to see how people liked it. Well, they have my vote!*

Panels on the windows slowly slid open and we all gasped as we looked out. The Earth below was in all its blue-green-white-brown glory. I could see the terminator where night ends and day begins. *What a visual effect! These guys are really skilled with computer graphics and animation.* The airplane or simulator (*that's what it is*) rotated slightly.

“Look, there's the Moon rolling past the window.”

The Earth receded into the distance and then the Moon disappeared. Stars filled a black sky. After the seats returned to vertical, a light breakfast was served in what looked like those tubes that astronauts use in weightlessness. It wasn't bad, but food in a toothpaste-like form wasn't my preference. *Oh well, all for the illusion of spaceflight.* Later we watched a movie.

“We are nearing the Moon. Securely tighten your seat belts. Do not move about the cabin; you can be seriously injured.”

The Moon slowly approached. We seemed to glide across the surface and continued to what the pilot said was the far side. The airplane or whatever seemed to rotate and down we

went, stopping with a slight bump. More rumblings were heard and then an extended series of small lurches, as we seemed to be moving sideways. Looking outside at the Moon's nearby surface, strongly lit by lights, I could see that we were sliding forward on rails to a large low building.

With a final clunk and the sound of hissing air, the door opened. Passengers began to exit to the Moon Terminal. A short hallway extended from the door, passed through double airlocks, and into a large room with windows looking out onto the moonscape. *It looks so real. I feel so light. How did they achieve that?*

A buffet table was set up with an abundance of food and drinks. Bob and I and our group headed for that, except for some folks who seemed to be sick from the light feeling.

There were a number of good-looking women in the buffet line. Bob and I introduced us to two of them, Sara and Nancy Sue. *This trip is well worth the \$20. Nancy Sue seems to be making eyes at me. I love her Texas accent.*

With our plates full, we latched onto an empty table. A short rotund man in a too-tight uniform stepped onto a platform and welcomed us.

“Although you are now on the Moon, we will not be able to go outside. This requires considerable training. However, enjoy yourself and the view. We are on the dark side, but the artificial lighting should be sufficient to see what is out there. Now and then, you might see a work vehicle or some of the selenauts moving about. Our staff is available to answer questions concerning what you see.

Included in this trip is a small room for each of you. We apologize for its size, but the facility has limitations. Your bags are in your rooms. Have a good time.

In the morning we will reboard the ship and return. Please show up in the main hall at 1:30 AM. A wakeup alarm will ring in each room at 1:00 AM.”

It was a great afternoon and night. There was lots of partying. Bob paired up with Sara, and I with Nancy Sue. A dance floor filled up quickly. A photographer walked about taking group pictures.

Sleeping was weird. I felt that I was floating a bit. In the early AM I got up and quickly packed and went out to the main hall where people were gathering. Tickets in hand we blearily waited.

There was an announcement:

“If your ticket number is not called, it means that you had a one-way ticket. Round-trip ticket holders will board now. Other ticket holders will need to go to the Base Manager’s office.”

Boarding I took the same seat as before. There were many empty seats when we “took off.” I didn’t see Bob or Sara. However, I could see Nancy Sue’s big Texas-style hairdo ahead of me.

Then we were off. At least now, I had more opportunity to see out the windows. Earth began to grow larger. We entered the atmosphere after the windows shut. *How did they achieve this feeling of deceleration?*

Then there was a period of quiet, a slight bump and deep rumblings.

“You may now get out of your seats and leave the ship.”

Our buses waited, but not as many as before. I suppose they were charging the one-way ticket holders an additional fee.

Nancy Sue gave me a big hug and said, “I’m off to the airport. Ya’ll have to come to Dallas to see me sometime!” She went off to another bus.

As the bus moved along the highway, I could see the Moon. *Wouldn’t it be great to really go there?* Arriving at my apartment, I hopped out with my small bag and waved goodbye to the others.

Tired, but satisfied I went to bed.

Later I wondered what else Quark Space Travel offered. Entering the URL for the website: <http://www.quarkspacetravel.com>

A message appeared on the screen:

Server not found. Firefox cannot find the server at www.quarkspacetravel.com

- **Check the address for typing errors such as Ww.example.com instead of www.example.com**
- **If you are unable to load any pages, check your computer’s network connection.**
- **If a firewall or proxy protects your computer or network, make sure that Firefox is permitted to access the Web**

I tried to access the website a number of times over the next few days and weeks. There was nothing. *Must have been just for introductory product promotion.*

Then one morning, walking to breakfast at Elmer’s Diner I noted a rack full of tabloids at a small newsstand.

ALIENS KIDNAP AND TAKE PEOPLE TO THE MOON!

128 PERSONS FROM AREA MISSING!

Laughing I picked up a copy and paid the vendor. The pictures showed a smiling group of people standing about in what appeared to be the Moon Terminal Main Hall. *That’s*

interesting. Then I noticed my smiling face staring back into the camera. Hey, it's also Bob, Sara and Nancy Sue! Is this part of the same Quark Space Travel thing? What an imagination they have!