

Q & A

THE BUCKET LIST

Sir Richard Branson's next trip will be out of this world. By *Holly Rubenstein*



Next stop, outer space

What's at the top of your bucket list? Space.

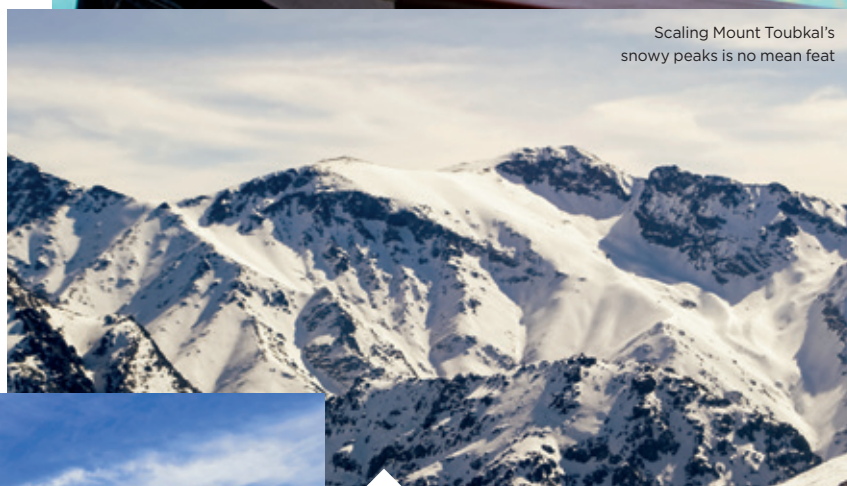
If I haven't been into space 12 months from now, something will have gone seriously wrong. We have sent five people into space in the last few months and they've come back with their eyes ten times the size. I'm very, very excited about the idea.

What is your earliest childhood travel memory?

That would be going to Menorca in the Balearics with my family. Just off mainland Spain, it was still completely undiscovered – I think my parents were pioneers in taking us there. We had a lovely time on our beaten up old boat which we would take out. They are very happy memories.



Richard spent his childhood holidays on Menorca



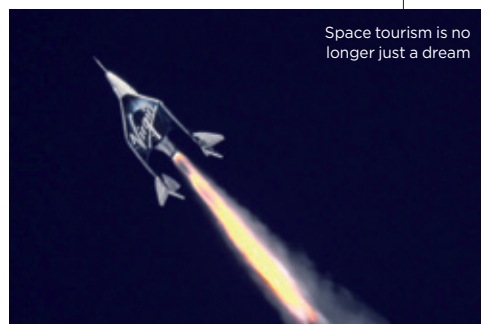
Scaling Mount Toubkal's snowy peaks is no mean feat

TELL US ABOUT A HIDDEN GEM

The Atlas Mountains, outside Marrakech. Mount Toubkal is a lovely mountain to climb. We did it last year – it's the second highest mountain in Africa. And we just happen to have a little hotel up there called the Kasbah Tamadot, which is run by the Berber community. They are just such gentle, wonderful people and I've been there six times in the last year alone.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

Locals lead the safaris at Mahali Mzuri in Kenya



Space tourism is no longer just a dream

What does the next chapter hold?

Virgin Hotels are opening in Chicago, San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, Nashville and Dallas over the next few months. I'm very proud of the job they've done. We're launching our new cruises, Virgin Voyages, later this year – and if people enjoy that, they can upgrade and go to space with us with Virgin Galactic.

The place you'd never return to? I've been to a lot of hotels over the years and it can be just ghastly how you're treated in some places. Sometimes they just don't seem to know how to get anything right – I won't name names, but there is a long list. I don't think there's any place in the world that I'd never go back to, because every place has its magic – if you search for it. A place is simply people, and you'll find special people in all parts of the world.

All-time favourite destination?

Our home on Necker Island, but I absolutely love Africa. We have created our own little places there too – Ulusaba in South Africa and Mahali Mzuri in Kenya, where the migration takes place. We've got wild dogs and the best sighting of leopards.



Spot leopards at Ulusaba



Richard fell in love with Necker Island many years ago

The Great House pool at Necker Island



Live like Richard at his Virgin Islands home



Where was the first place you fell in love with?

I found the first place I truly fell in love with when I was 27 years old. I was trying to persuade a lovely young lady to come and live with me, and somebody asked if we'd named Virgin after the Virgin Islands – we hadn't, I didn't even know they existed. I managed to persuade this lady to come with me there for the weekend, and we went

looking for an island. We had no money to buy an island – we just thought it would be a fun thing to do. An estate agent laid on a helicopter and we came across this beautiful island called Necker Island, with pristine clear water all around it and exquisite reefs. I looked at her and thought, 'She could be the mother of my children.' I looked at the island and thought, 'This is where we could live,' and it was love all round. ■

Virgin Hotels San Francisco is open now. virginhotels.com