# GIANT steps are what you take

From left: Apollo 11 astronauts Buzz Aldrin, Michael Collins, Neil Armstrong

The space conference phenomenon brings together historians, scientists, those who subscribe to elves in space theories, and those paying homage to that rarest of rare breeds – astronauts who walked on the Moon. WORDS **CHRIS WRIGHT**

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES


Moonwalkers at Spacefest IV: Buzz Aldrin (left); Gene Cernan in person and painting (below)

IN A DIMLY LIT CORNER of an Arizona hotel ballroom, a handful of elderly gentlemen sit in two lines of booths. Some have walking sticks, others hearing aids; they chat genially with people passing by. They look a lot like the rest of America's sprightly 80-somethings, but they are crucially different – because unlike the other seven billion of us, these are six of the eight surviving men who have set foot on the Moon.

This is Spacefest IV, which took place in Tucson in June, and it's the biggest example of an increasingly popular field: the space conference. Events such as these bring together a curious mixture of scientists and astronauts, artists and scholars, conspiracy theorists and space groupies.

It's this eclectic combination that gives the event its appeal. There is real, important science here; panels feature some of the world's foremost voices in fields such as asteroid assessment, spacesuit design, propulsion technology and the feasibility of visits to Mars. The experts talk about the cutting edge of space exploration to small gatherings of earnest attendees. The questions come thick and fast: some scientific ("What do you think about the properties of asteroid DA14?"), some opportunist ("How much can we make from mining helium-3?"), some just out-there ("Do we need asteroid insurance?").

But for many people, it's the astronauts of the 1960s and '70s who are the main draw. There has been a revival of interest in Apollo, and the Gemini and Mercury programs that preceded it. With every passing year, it seems more and more astounding that we landed on the Moon six times from 1969 to 1972; with every new grey hair and fading faculty of the astronauts, now in their 80s, it becomes more glaringly obvious how space exploration appears to have regressed – at least in terms of people leaving the planet rather than just orbiting around it – in the intervening four decades. In private, everyone says the same thing: these guys aren't going to be around for long (Neil Armstrong died in August), so we should take the chance to hear what they've got to say while we can.

For the astronauts, this is a little industry, a fundraiser – because after all, nobody got rich being paid by NASA, and even in retirement many of them could probably use the money. The norm is that they charge for autographs and photos.

But one of the fascinating asides of a conference like this is the clear hierarchy that exists between the astronauts and what they did. Top of the tree by an absolute mile in terms of his charges ❯

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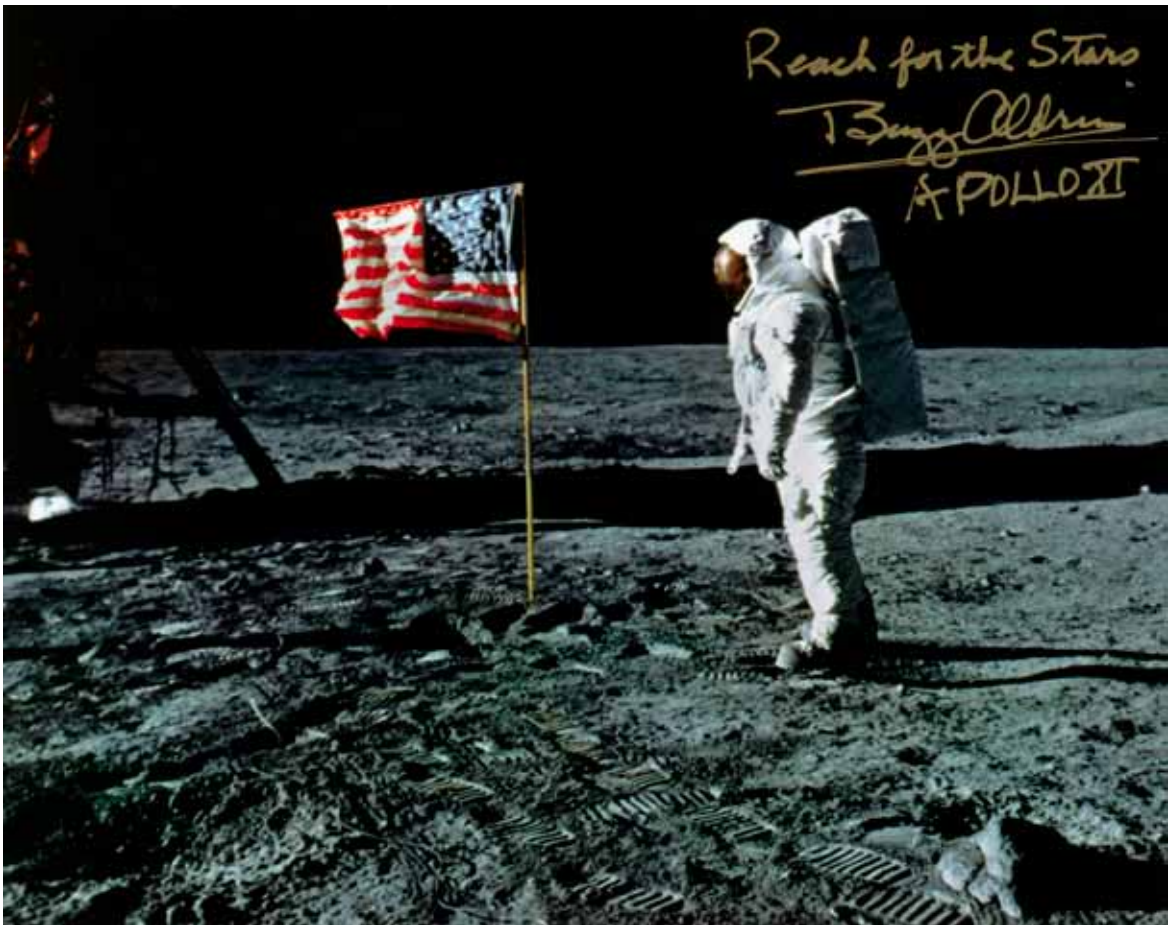



**MAN ON THE MOON**

**Neil Armstrong's photo of Aldrin on the Moon**

> APOLLO ASTRONAUTS SAT UNATTENDED AT THEIR BOOTHS WHILE EVERYONE FORMED A SCRUM AROUND A CAST MEMBER FROM *STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION*

is Buzz Aldrin: $US400 for an autograph, $US1000 when it completed a set with Neil Armstrong and Mike Collins (his colleagues on Apollo 11, the first to land on the Moon); and, inexplicably, $US1500 if it's on a baseball. Other mission commanders of Apollo landings such as Gene Cernan and Dave Scott charge around $US200 as a base fee, with an arcane methodology of extra charges for "difficult to sign" items; moonwalkers, but not commanders, such as Alan Bean, Charlie Duke and Ed Mitchell charge $US100-$150. Those who flew to the Moon and orbited it, but didn't land on it, Al Worden and Dick Gordon, for example, are in the $US80-$90 bracket, and those who flew the Space Shuttle, less again. And then, in a corner, there's David Hatch from *Battlestar Galactica*. He charges $US20 a pop.

In his book *Moondust*, Andrew Smith recalls one of these events in which heroic Apollo astronauts sat unattended at their booths while everyone formed a scrum around a cast member from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, ignoring the fact that there were genuine astronauts just a few metres away. Today in Tucson, Hatch is drawing a reasonable crowd, but in fact the single most-photographed person or object is Aldrin's fee card.

A look at a nearby auction helps to explain why the astronauts have started seeking a piece of the financial action. A fast-talking auctioneer is fronting a combined internet and ballroom sale of some quite fabulously obscure items. A flown SRB (solid rocket booster) APU exhaust duct goes for $US325 to an internet bidder. A steal at $US75, a flown SRB nose cap combined detonating fuse is inexplicably passed in without a bid. And then, a moment of excitement: a man in a cowboy hat in the room successfully bids $US75 for a "remove before flight" streamer from the Space Shuttle – meaning, presumably, that it was removed before flight. The man in the cowboy hat breathes deeply with relief while bystanders give him a high five.

And this is nothing. Alan Lipkin runs Regency Superior, a Los Angeles-based collector and auctioneer of collectables in space and aviation, among other things. His business – one of four or five established houses – conducts three auctions a year for space memorabilia, typically turning over between half and three-quarters of a million dollars a time. He once sold a Gemini spacesuit for $US180,000, and a Mercury suit for well over $US100,000 more than 15 years ago.

Seeing the scale of the memorabilia business, he doesn't begrudge astronauts charging for autographs, but notes opinions among the astronauts themselves "vary quite strongly". Some astronauts rarely, if ever, sign autographs; Neil Armstrong famously quit signing in 1994. He did so because he resented the commercialisation of his signature (none of which, of course, benefited him), but the result of his decision was to push up the value of existing signatures ›

BUZZ ALDRIN ON MOON PHOTOGRAPHY: CORBIS AUSTRALIA

enormously: Lipkin says his signature ranges from $US300-$500 on a blank piece of card to $US1000-$4000 on a photo or letter, and up to $US10,000 on unusual items. "Others, such as Bill Anders [who flew on Apollo 8 and took the legendary *Earthrise* photo] have never been free with their autographs. Others have been so free with their autographs they have become almost worthless in the auction market." An example is John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth. Why? "He's a politician, so he signs a lot of signatures. It's supply and demand."

What's the appeal of memorabilia? "It's history, a new age of exploration," says Lipkin. "Would somebody want to have a signature of Christopher Columbus or Vasco da Gama or Magellan? A piece of the *Santa Maria* would be a museum piece of incalculable value, but you can get a piece of the Apollo 11 capsule that has been on the Moon. It is a true piece of world history."

Many people visiting the conference take a similar view. At one of the booths, Suzanne Babbio, who is an "age reductionist", is planting a kiss on Gene Cernan, the last man on the Moon on Apollo 17. What brings her here? "It's part of history, an honour," she says. "These guys were heroes and when the space program ended they were dishonoured, in a way." Behind her, an entire school class from Montreux, in Switzerland, some of the students looking as young as 11, files past in uniform to quiz Buzz Aldrin on orbital mechanics.

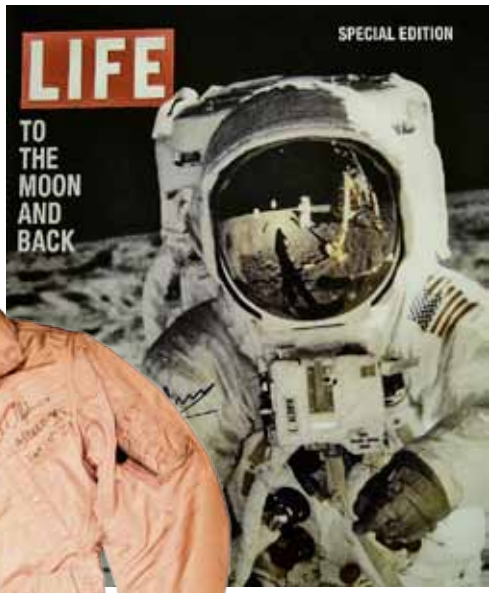
Elsewhere in the ballroom is the art show, where a host of artists who paint space-related art display their work. One person whose original work *isn't* on display here is Alan Bean, the fourth man on the Moon on Apollo 12; a genial, straight-talking, very funny Texan, Bean devoted his life after NASA (he also commanded the second Skylab mission) to painting images of the Apollo landings, using a cast of his moon boot to add texture, and adding a little bit of genuine moondust from his mission patches into the paint. His original paintings aren't on show because they're far too valuable: if you want to buy a Bean original, the prices start at $US50,000.

What do they make of it all, these astronauts? None of them mentions the money he makes, but each seems to like the continuing interest in what he did and the chance to catch up. Do they meet otherwise? "Nah," says Dave Scott, commander of Apollo 15. "It was 40 years ago. Everyone's doing other things now."

Saturday night brings a banquet, with anniversary presentations and tributes to long-lost friends. Charlie Duke reprises his famous "You've got a bunch of guys about to turn blue here, we're breathing again" line (originally delivered as the Capcom communicator on the radio to Neil Armstrong during the first Moon landing in 1969) to widespread delight. And Gene Cernan, the most statesmanlike of the moonwalkers, wobbling a little now in both the knee and the voice, makes a familiar call for "kids to dream about doing things they didn't think they were capable of doing, to reach out and once again do the impossible."

And finally, on Sunday morning, after a $US180-a-head breakfast, comes the Apollo panel, which is moderated by space historian and writer Andrew Chaikin. Five of the veterans, moonwalkers and moon-orbiters, household names one and all, shoot the breeze in front of an enraptured audience. They weep for dying friends from the Apollo years, of whom there are many; they reiterate, again and again, how it took 400,000 people to actually get them to the Moon; they bemoan, angrily, America's sliding status in space exploration; and they bicker, as close friends do, about the minutiae of spaceflight and the pranks they played on one another.

There is an acute sense of an increasingly distant and joyous past, a fading out of heroic explorers, galvanised by a crowd of far younger people whose fascination with the Apollo space missions and the Moon has never been greater.




**PRICES OUT OF THIS WORLD...**

***Life* cover ($US960); astronaut overalls ($US121,000); and baseball – all signed by Buzz Aldrin**

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