



You are here: | [Home](#) | Science

Expat Entrepreneur blasts off

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Author: Leigh Dayton

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From country New South Wales to low-earth orbit, Chris Boshuizen's fascination with space has launched him on a professional journey of creative discovery. Now based in California, the award-winning physicist has designed lunar landers and tiny satellites for NASA, and setup a satellite start-up in San Francisco.

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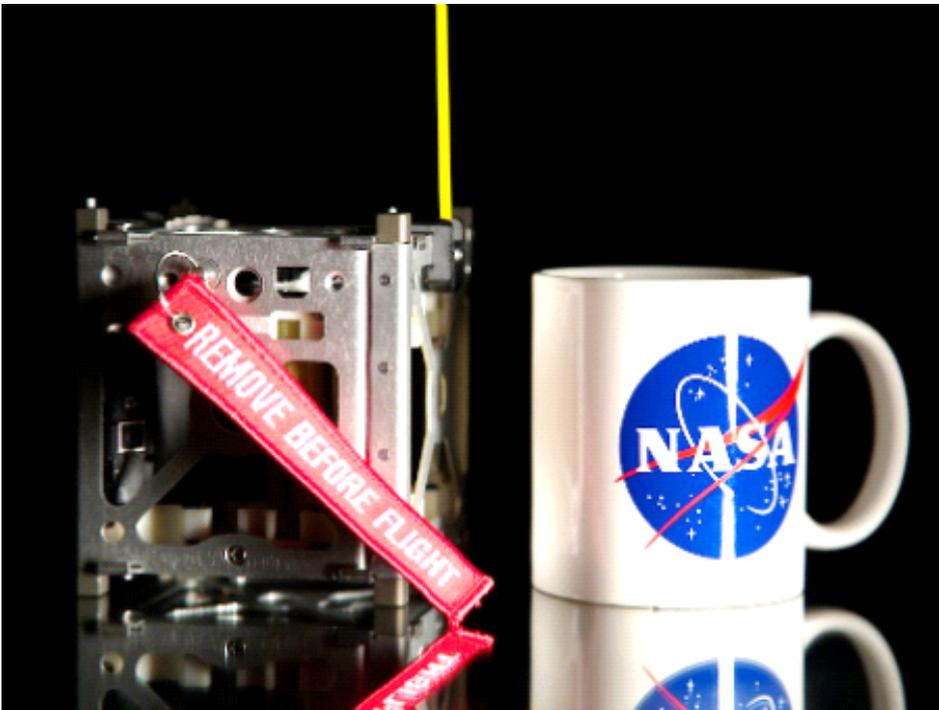
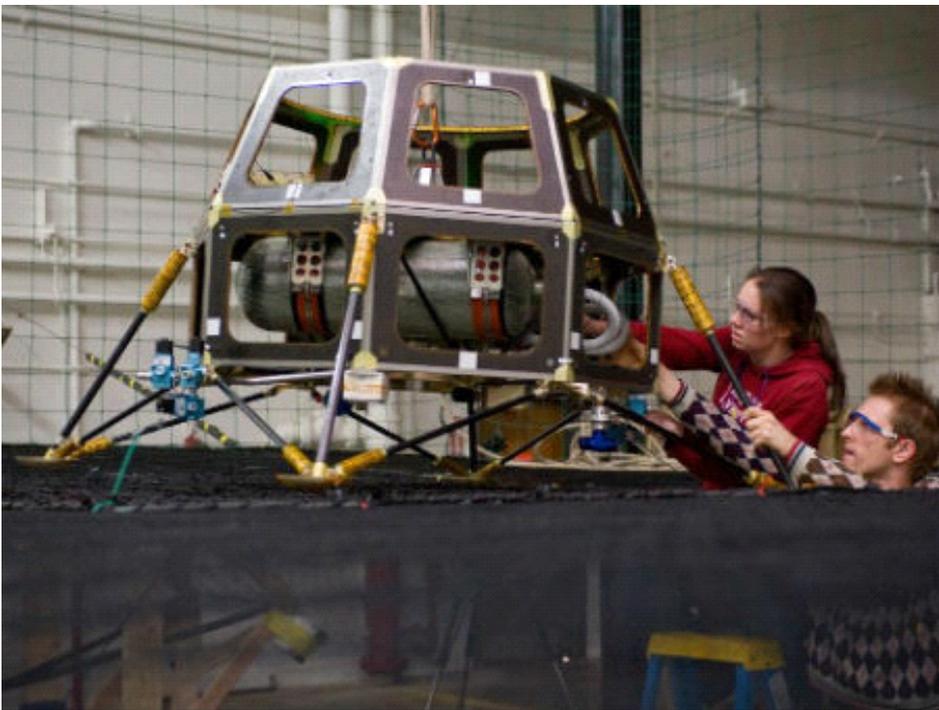
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Chris Boshuizen doesn't fit the image of a high-flying, big-spending, start-up executive. Yes, he lives in downtown San Francisco, California, but his home office is in a tiny one-bedroom apartment. "My net worth is tied-up in the Planet's success," explains the 38-year-old Australian physicist turned expat entrepreneur.

When Boshuizen talks of the Planet he's not just speaking metaphorically, although helping to solve climate change or feeding the world is part of what gets him up in the morning. The 'Planet' is also Planet Labs, a space start-up venture Boshuizen co-founded in 2010.

The little business - located in San Francisco's trendy South of Market district - builds and launches micro-satellites the size of a loaf of bread. It then sells customers the imagery and data collected by a network of satellites.

In turn, Planet Labs' clients use the information for applications as diverse as monitoring crops, forestry and maritime operations, and planning urban and transport projects. The imagery also provides critical intelligence for disaster response, crisis management and humanitarian aid.

After building and testing hundreds of 'doves' as they call their satellites, Planet Labs has a flock of 60 orbiting in lowearth orbit, 400 kilometres above Earth. This is the world's largest network of Earth-observing satellites.

Not satisfied with monitoring the planet 24/7, in November 2015 Boshuizen moved on from Planet Labs. The firm was up and running successfully. It was time to contribute to the metaphorical planet another way.

He joined Data Collective, a San Francisco-based venture capital fund that invests in entrepreneurs building 'Big Data' companies. As Boshuizen explains, these outfits do everything from creating large, complex databases and faster processing of information from diverse sources, to applications that identify novel and interesting data patterns that might be exploited.

Boshuizen's position title is Entrepreneur in Residence. He's now one of what he calls the "council of wise men – with money". It's not his money, but it's real money, and Boshuizen's job is to find companies doing hard, complicated things worthy of support. As one of the wise men, Boshuizen gives Data Collective advice, "I give the thumbs up or thumbs down on funding tech and hardware companies" he explains.

If that isn't enough to fill a more-than-respectable resume, Boshuizen is also an ex-NASA scientist and winner

of the Advanced Manufacturing Award at the 2014 Advance Global Australian Awards. He was also ushered into the Business Review Weekly Young Rich List in 2014, at number 73, for helping to build Planet Labs from a great idea to a going concern.

And going it is. In 2015 the firm announced last year that it had raised US\$95 million, bringing its funding to over US\$160 million.

It's little wonder then, that in December 2015 Boshuizen became an official 'rock star' of innovation. Selected by consultancy Knowledge Society and the Office of the Chief Scientist, the Knowledge Nation 100 Australians, including Boshuizen, are people at the cutting edge of innovation and science in Australia, people contributing to Australia's future economy, at home and abroad.

And to think it all started in Tumbarumba in country New South Wales. "It's a really small town," says Boshuizen. His parents – a chemist and the foreman of the biggest sawmill in the southern hemisphere - were interested in ideas. They exposed Boshuizen and his three younger sisters to the world of ideas, including space.

"I was always interested in space," he says. "I don't know how it got in my head, but I remember being really young and watching Carl Sagan's Cosmos. I got to stay up late, so it was special."

Boshuizen followed his obsession with space through high school, then on to the University of Sydney for his undergraduate and doctorate degrees in Mathematics and Physics. His supervisor Professor Ted Bedding gave him some important advice: "When you get near the end of your PhD, go to a conference in an area you want to work in."

The young space-mad physicist followed that advice, attending an industry space conference near NASA's Johnson Space Centre in Houston, Texas. "I met a whole bunch of really cool people," Boshuizen says. "I felt I'd found my people - people who love space."

From Houston it was one small step to Space Generation, a global not-for-profit networking organisation, representing university students and young space professionals to the United Nations, space agencies, industry and academia. Not prone to doing things by half-measure, Boshuizen soon became Executive Director.

One day near Christmas 2008, the phone rang. It was NASA calling. Would Boshuizen be interested in working at the space agency's Ames Research centre in Moffett Field, California, smack in the heart of Silicon Valley? Boshuizen flew over, did an interview, and started two weeks later.

"I sold my entire household on Gumtree, \$2,000 for the lot," he remembers. With his parents' good wishes and two suitcases, Boshuizen took up his post as a Space Mission Architect where he worked on a Lunar lander.

Meanwhile, NASA boss and engineer Pete Klupar inspired Boshuizen and his fellow tinkerers, Will Marshall and Robbie Schingler, to kick-start another project. "He joked about his phone being smarter than most NASA satellites." We took him seriously.

The result was Phonesat, a 'cheap as chips' satellite built from a smartphone. "It was the brain, eyes and ears of the satellite," Boshuizen states. "We put it in a box, launched it, and took a picture." NASA paid \$500 for the launch aboard an Antares rocket.

"Now NASA's enthusiastic about low cost satellites," says Boshuizen proudly. "Before, nobody believed it would work."

Work it did. So well that Boshuizen, Marshall and Schingler believed they could build a business based on the concept. The trio designed prototypes during their weekends. Then, in 2011 they took a big breath, quit their jobs, and, launched Planet Labs. Not bad for a boy from Tumbarumba.

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