

Branson's Virgin Galactic Completes First Solo Space Flight

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Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic on Sunday completed its first manned free flight of a spaceship intended to eventually take customers on commercial space flights.

SpaceShipTwo, also known as the VSS Enterprise, was piloted by Pete Siebold and Mike Alsbury. Virgin Galactic was testing whether the spaceship could successfully release from its mothership and glide back to Earth. The ship did indeed release at 45,000 feet and land safely at Mojave Air and Space Port in California.

The mothership, named the WhiteKnightTwo, had flown 40 times prior to Sunday's free flight, including four trips during which the VSS Enterprise was attached. On July 15, Virgin Galactic flew for the first time with a crew on board.

"The VSS Enterprise was a real joy to fly, especially when one considers the fact that the vehicle has been designed not only to be a Mach 3.5 spaceship capable of going into space but also one of the worlds highest altitude gliders," Siebold said in a statement.

Virgin Galactic space flights are the brainchild of Branson, who heads up the Virgin empire.

"This was one of the most exciting days in the whole history of Virgin," Branson said in a statement. "For the first time since we seriously began the project in 2004, I watched the world's first manned commercial spaceship landing on the runway at Mojave Air and Space Port and it was a great moment. Now, the sky is no longer the limit and we will begin the process of pushing beyond to the final frontier of space itself over the next year."

A seat on Branson's spaceship will cost \$200,000 per person, with refundable deposits starting at \$20,000. There is interest, however. Virgin Galactic has managed to sell 700 seats thus far.

In September, Boeing announced that it is partnering with Virginia-based Space Adventures to sell commercial space flights. The CST-100 spacecraft can fit seven people, and is expected to be operational by 2015.

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