

Space tourism port to be sited in Abu Dhabi

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This handout photo courtesy of Virgin Galactic shows Sir Richard Branson (L) and designer Burt Rutan as they walk aside the Virgin Mothership "Eve" in Mojave, California, July 2008. Tourists will be able to journey to outer space via Abu Dhabi as part of a deal by a local investment group to take a stake in Virgin Galactic, the world's first commercial space travel operator.

Tourists will be able to journey to outer space via Abu Dhabi as part of a deal by a local investment group to take a stake in the world's first commercial space travel operator, the two companies said on Tuesday.

Aabar Investments said it plans to build a space port in [Abu Dhabi](#), capital of the seven-member [United Arab Emirates](#) federation, after agreeing to buy about a 32 percent stake in the holding company of Virgin Galactic for 280 million dollars, valuing the business at around 900 million dollars.

Aabar expects to spend another 100 million dollars a small satellite launch facility and will gain exclusive regional rights to host Virgin Galactic tourism and scientific research space flights, it said.

"The significant partnership not only falls in line with Abu Dhabi's larger plans to inculcate technology research and science at a grassroots level but also complements its aim to be the international tourism capital of the region," Khadem al-Qubaisi, chairman of Aabar, said.

Virgin Galactic, fully owned until now by Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group, was set up in 2004 to provide commercial space travel and the project is in its final stages with the test flight programme underway.

About 300 people worldwide have paid 40 million dollars in deposits to book a seat to space, the statement said.

SpaceShipOne, the world's first privately built manned spaceship, flew safely to space and back three times in 2004, according to the statement.

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