

Space tourism yet to fly, 5 years since 1st flight

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FILE - This Oct. 4, 2004 file photo shows SpaceShipOne and X Prize team members posing with a U.S. flag carried aboard the spacecraft after its successful flight into space and landing at Mojave, Calif. From left are prize sponsors Anousheh Ansari and her brother-in-law, Amir Ansari, Peter Diamandis, chairman of the Ansari X Prize Foundation, project backer Paul Allen, SpaceShipOne creator Burt Rutan, pilot Brian Binnie and Sir Richard Branson. Enthusiasm over SpaceShipOne's feats was so high in 2004 that even before the prize-winning flight, British mogul Richard Branson announced an agreement to use the technology in a second-generation design, SpaceShipTwo, to fly commercial passengers into space under the Virgin Galactic banner by 2007. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon, File)

(AP) -- When a private spaceship soared over California to claim a \$10 million prize, daredevil venture capitalist Alan Walton was 68 and thought he'd soon be on a rocket ride of his own.

Walton plunked down \$200,000 to be among the first space tourists to

make a suborbital thrill-ride high above the Earth aboard a Virgin Galactic [spaceship](#).

Now he intends to ask for his deposit back if there's no fixed launch date by his 74th birthday next April.

"This was going to be the highlight of my old age," he said.

It has been five years since SpaceShipOne, the first privately financed manned spacecraft, captured the Ansari [X Prize](#) on Oct. 4, 2004, by demonstrating that a reusable rocket capable of carrying passengers could fly more than 62 miles high twice within two weeks - showing reliability and commercial viability.

Enthusiasm over SpaceShipOne's feats was so high that year that even before the prize-winning flight, British mogul [Richard Branson](#) announced an agreement to use the technology in a second-generation design, SpaceShipTwo, to fly commercial passengers into space under the Virgin Galactic banner by 2007.

It seemed that anyone who had the money would soon be experiencing what SpaceShipOne pilot Brian Binnie called "literally a rush - you light that motor off and the world wakes up around you." And then the sensation of weightlessness and the sight of the world far below.

Turning the dream into reality has taken longer than many expected in those days, and spaceflight remains the realm of government astronauts and a handful of extraordinarily wealthy people who have paid millions for rides on Russian rockets to the [international space station](#).

X Prize founder Peter Diamandis says, however, that things have not been at a standstill.

More than \$1 billion has been invested in the industry, regulatory roadblocks have been addressed and as many as three different passenger spaceships will emerge in the next 18 to 24 months and begin flying, he said.

"You'll get another large injection of excitement in public interest once those vehicles begin operating and the public starts getting flown," he said.

Freight business owner Edwin Sahakian has seen signs of progress. He and four other Virgin Galactic customers got a peek at SpaceShipTwo this summer during a visit to the Scaled Composites plant at the Mojave Airport, where it is being built by maverick aviation designer Burt Rutan.

At the time it was the color of carbon fiber - dark gray - and had not been painted. Its engine had not been assembled either, but Sahakian was impressed with one aspect: lots of big windows.

"This is not a grandiose mock-up. This is the real thing," said the 46-year-old Sahakian, who is a flight instructor in his spare time.

During the campaign to win the X Prize, Rutan had stressed that a tourism spacecraft would have to have big windows to give passengers a view and it would have to be at least 100 times safer than any spacecraft ever flown.

The project was dealt a setback two years ago when three technicians were killed in an explosion while testing SpaceShipTwo's propellant system. Scaled Composites, which was bought by Northrop Grumman Corp., was cited for five workplace violations and fined \$28,870 in connection with the blast that also critically injured three men.

Like SpaceShipOne, its successor will be carried aloft by a special jet aircraft dubbed the WhiteKnightTwo. The rocketship will be released at high altitude before the pilot ignites its motor. After reaching the top of its trajectory, it will fall back into the atmosphere and glide to a landing.

Virgin Galactic President Will Whitehorn said testing of WhiteKnightTwo is in full swing, with flights above 52,000 feet.

The completed SpaceShipTwo is expected to be unveiled in December in Mojave and first test flights will begin next year, with full-fledged space launches to its maximum altitude by or during 2011, Whitehorn said.

But no timetable for the start of commercial operations is being released, he said.

Whitehorn said Virgin Galactic continues to hold \$40 million in deposits by 300 customers.

X Prize Foundation President Robert K. Weiss acknowledged that "things are a few years behind what was originally anticipated" but said he is certain there will be commercial spaceflights within this decade and the interest of people will be reinvigorated.

"When the demand starts to ramp up, the price is going to come down and so it's not going to be a couple hundred thousand dollars, it's going to be the price of, let's say, an automobile," he said.

The foundation, meanwhile, has branched out with its concept of spurring innovation through monetary incentives. Multimillion-dollar X Prizes are being offered in competitions to send a privately funded robot to the moon, build production-capable cars with the equivalent of 100 mpg efficiency, and for developing technology to greatly reduce the time

it takes to sequence human genomes.

Diamandis said that while 10 years ago, he found it hard to get anyone to listen to the concept of the X Prize until telecommunications millionaire Anousheh Ansari and her family funded the first one.

Now he says he is seeing a substantial increase in interest from philanthropists, corporations and government agencies in spurring innovation through incentives.

"In financial stress times, prizes really work very well because you only pay upon success," he said.

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