

Maiden flight for Virgin Galactic's 'SpaceShipTwo' (Update)

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Flightglobal.com handout photo shows the first flight of the Virgin Galactic Spaceship 2 from in Mojave, California. Virgin Galactic's experimental SpaceshipTwo (SS2), an aircraft designed to one day carry paying customers into space, had its maiden flight in the California desert Monday, company officials announced.

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The spacecraft, brainchild of British entrepreneur Richard Branson, took off nestled under the wing of its mothership White Knight Two (WK2).

"Virgin Galactic announced that its commercial manned spaceship, VSS Enterprise, this morning successfully completed its first 'captive carry'

test flight, taking off at 07:05 am (PST) from Mojave Air and Spaceport, California," the company said in a statement.

The British magnate lauded the innovative design for Virgin Galactic delivered by Scaled Composites, Burt Rutan's aircraft maker in Mojave. The design was unveiled December 7 and dubbed Virgin Space Ship (VSS) Enterprise.

In the future, WK2 will carry SpaceshipTwo to an altitude of around 50,000 feet (16 kilometers) before dropping the smaller spaceship and allowing it to fire up its rocket motor to launch into space.

Monday's test flight, which lasted just a few minutes, was the first in which both aircraft went aloft without separating. The test flight was carried out about 130 kilometers (80 miles) northeast of Los Angeles.

Virgin Galactic aims to become the world's first commercial company to promote space tourism. It hopes to start test flights in 2010-2011, with tourists able to shell out 200,000 dollars per person.

If you think the waiting list to fly into space might not exactly be crowded, think again; Virgin Galactic already has collected 45 million dollars in paid deposits from more than 330 people who have reserved seats aboard the six-person craft.

"This is a momentous day for the Scaled and Virgin Teams," Rutan glowed.

"The captive carry flight signifies the start of what we believe will be an extremely exciting and successful spaceship flight test program."

And Branson was not shy about voicing his satisfaction.

"Seeing the finished spaceship in December was a major day for us but watching VSS Enterprise fly for the first time really brings home what beautiful, ground-breaking vehicles Burt and his team have developed for us," he said.

So "it comes as no surprise that the flight went so well; the Scaled team is uniquely qualified to bring this important and incredible dream to reality. Today was another major step along that road and a testament to US engineering and innovation," Branson added.

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