

Technology-loving Virgin America goes international

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Sir Richard Branson flies on Virgin America's first international flight to Toronto in Los Angeles, California. Branson propped up his shoeless feet as he headed from San Francisco to Toronto on his technology-loving airline's inaugural international flight.

Billionaire Sir Richard Branson propped up his shoeless feet as he headed from San Francisco to Toronto on his technology-loving airline's inaugural international flight.

He dreamed of a day when Virgin America would whisk him and other globetrotters from California to Australia in a mere two hours with the help of rockets developed in another of his endeavors: commercial space travel.

"I'm determined to do it in my lifetime," said Branson, who turns 60 in July. "Fortunately, both my parents are still alive and in their nineties, so I've got a few years to get it worked out."

Branson was confident that the world would see commercial space flight in about two years, but said it could take 10 times that long to put the science to work on that quick flight to Sydney or Melbourne.

Meanwhile on Tuesday he was celebrating Virgin America's first international route with service to Toronto. Later this year the airline plans to add Mexican cities to its list of destinations.

California's celebrity governor Arnold Schwarzenegger stopped by San Francisco International Airport to take part in a send-off ceremony.

The governor lauded Branson for his "audacity and great vision," praising Virgin for having modern, sophisticated and fuel-efficient jets.

The British entrepreneur launched San Francisco-based Virgin America in August 2007, after appeasing regulators that forbid more than 25 percent foreign ownership of US airlines.

The low-cost carrier quickly established itself as a hip operation tuned into the Internet Age lifestyle. Virgin jets were the first to feature plugs at passenger seats for charging laptops, iPods, smartphones or other gadgets.

Virgin added seat-back screens so passengers could watch movies, play videogames, check email, or even send messages to fellow travelers on flights.

"If I am sitting in seat 1K and see an attractive lady in seat 4A I can send her a message that I have an empty seat next to me and hope she comes

to make use of it," Branson said.

"I am actually a married man, but some men might find their future wife or they just might have a good night, or some women might get lucky too," quipped Branson, whose Virgin Group owns 25 percent of the airline.

Virgin set another airborne standard by turning its jets into flying "hot spots" where passengers can get wireless Internet connections for 13 dollars.

"Wi-Fi and power, certainly," flight attendant Boris Wilson said before poking fun at other airlines' offerings. "But, no peanuts. Sorry."

Branson said basing Virgin America in the San Francisco area has enabled him to tap into technology innovations including social networking star Facebook and microblogging sensation Twitter.

Virgin teams have worked closely with Internet powerhouse Google. The web search titan's co-founder Larry Page was married on Branson's Necker Island in the Caribbean.

"If you are creating any kind of new experience for members of the public you've got to be well ahead of everybody else," Branson said.

"Therefore, you've either got to be technically savvy yourself or surround yourself with technically savvy people. I am more the latter than the former."

Virgin has said its reputation for embracing innovation has fortunately attracted talented people eager to charge into new frontiers.

"We've got flagship companies like Virgin Galactic," Branson said,

referring to the firm whose experimental SpaceshipTwo aircraft designed to one day carry paying customers into space had its maiden flight over the California desert in March.

"You've got to pinch yourself when you think about what they are getting up to there. It is so exciting."

Branson said he takes his dreams to Virgin engineers and scientists to be made real.

"It is about keeping on asking questions, dreaming, pushing and inspiring," Branson said. "If you cut corners, don't innovate, you will disappear because somebody else does it better."

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