

Private spaceship makes first solo glide flight (w/ Video)

October 11 2010



In this photo released by Virgin Galactic, the Virgin Galactic SpaceShipTwo, or VSS Enterprise, is released from the mothership, WhiteKnight2, also known as VMS Eve, over the Mojave, Calif., area early Sunday, Oct. 10, 2010.

SpaceShipTwo is undergoing rigorous testing before it can carry tourists to space. In the latest test, SpaceShipTwo did not fire its rocket engine to climb to space. The craft was piloted by engineer and test pilot Pete Siebold from Scaled Composites. (AP Photo/Clay Observatory for Virginia Galactic, Mark Greenberg) NO SALES

Virgin Galactic's space tourism rocket SpaceShipTwo achieved its first solo glide flight Sunday, marking another step in the company's eventual plans to fly paying passengers.

SpaceShipTwo was carried aloft by its mothership to an altitude of 45,000 feet and released over the Mojave Desert. After the separation, SpaceShipTwo, manned by two pilots, flew freely for 11 minutes before landing at an airport runway followed by the mothership.

The entire test flight lasted about 25 minutes.

"It flew beautifully," said Virgin Galactic chief executive George Whitesides.

The six-passenger SpaceShipTwo is undergoing rigorous testing before it can carry tourists to space. In the latest test, SpaceShipTwo did not fire its [rocket engine](#) to climb to space.

Until now, SpaceShipTwo has flown attached to the wing of its special jet-powered mothership dubbed WhiteKnightTwo. Sunday was the first time the spaceship flew on its own.

"It's a very big deal," Virgin president [Sir Richard Branson](#) told The Associated Press. "There are a number of big deals on the way to getting commercial space travel becoming a reality. This was a very big step. We now know that the spaceship glides. We know it can be dropped safely from the mothership and we know it can land safely. That's three big ticks."

SpaceShipTwo will make a series of additional glide flights before rocketing to space.

"The next big step will be the rocket tests actually on the [spacecraft](#) itself," Branson said. "We've obviously have done thousands of rocket tests on the ground, the next big test is in the air. We'll be doing gentle rocket tests in the air, ultimately culminating into taking the spaceship into space."

SpaceShipTwo, built by famed aircraft designer Burt Rutan, is based on a prototype that won a \$10 million prize in 2004 for being the first manned private rocket to reach space.

Tickets to ride aboard SpaceShipTwo cost \$200,000. Some 370 customers have plunked down deposits totaling \$50 million, according to Virgin Galactic.

Commercial flights will fly out of New Mexico where a spaceport is under construction. Officials from Virgin Galactic and other dignitaries will gather at the spaceport Oct. 22 for an event commemorating the finished runway. The event will also feature a flyover by SpaceShipTwo and WhiteKnightTwo.

More information: Virgin Galactic: <http://www.virgingalactic.com>

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