

Branson and NM officials dedicate space terminal (Update)

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British billionaire Sir Richard Branson stands along side the spacecraft White Knight Two after a test flight outside the new Spaceport America hangar Monday, Oct. 17, 2011 in Upham, NM. Branson dedicated the newly completed terminal Monday where his Virgin Galactic is slated to begin his commercial space tourism venture from the remote patch of desert in Sierra County. (AP Photo/Matt York)

With his usual flair, British billionaire Richard Branson rappelled from a balcony, shook up a big bottle of champagne and took a swig while christening the world's first built-from-scratch commercial spaceport on Monday.

Branson's Virgin Galactic will stage its commercial space tourism venture from Spaceport America in a remote patch of desert in southern

New Mexico.

Branson was joined by Gov. Susana Martinez, astronaut Buzz Aldrin and scores of would-be space travelers at the terminal-hangar for the dedication. It had been nearly a year since Branson was in New Mexico to celebrate the completion of the runway.

"The building is absolutely magnificent," he said. "It is literally out of this world, and that's what we were aiming at creating."

With the spaceport and mothership completed, the company is now finalizing its rocket tests.

"We're ticking the final boxes on the way to space," Branson said.

He hopes enough powered test flights of Virgin Galactic's sleek spacecraft can be done by the end of 2012 to start commercial suborbital flights from the spaceport soon after.

More than 450 people have purchased tickets to fly with Virgin Galactic. About 150 of them attended the ceremony.

Before getting to enter the hangar, the crowd was treated to a flyover by WhiteKnightTwo, the mothership that one day will help take space tourists on suborbital flights.

The \$209 million taxpayer-financed spaceport will be a launch station for people and payloads on the rocket ships being developed for Virgin Galactic.

With custom metal paneling and massive panes of glass, the state-of-the-art terminal rises from the desert floor to face the nearly 2-mile concrete runway.

The building will house Virgin Galactic's spacecraft, mission control and a preparation area for travelers.

It was six years ago that Virgin Galactic and New Mexico officials reached an agreement to build the spaceport. Officials said the completion of the terminal and hangar marks another major milestone that brings the dream of rocketing tourists into space closer to reality.

Still, the question many are asking is when the first ships will launch from Spaceport America. It was Branson who once predicted the maiden passenger flight would take off in 2007.

Branson acknowledged the wait in an interview Monday. He and his two children will be among the first to fly, and he said he wants to ensure he can bring them home safely.

"We want to be sure we've really tested the craft through and through before turning it over to the astronauts who bought tickets to go up," he said. "If it takes a bit longer, we'll take a little bit longer."

Commercial service will start up after the company gets a license from the Federal Aviation Administration. NASA has already signed a \$4.5 million contract with the company for up to three chartered research flights.

Tickets for rides aboard WhiteKnightTwo cost \$200,000. The 2 1/2-hour flights will include about five minutes of weightlessness and views of Earth that until now only astronauts have been able to experience.

Like development of the spacecraft, construction of the 110,152-square-foot terminal and hangar facility has been complicated. There were delays, building code problems, contractor disputes and costly change

orders.

State officials blamed the unprecedented nature of the project as well as its remote location, the lack of infrastructure and the weather.

New Mexico Spaceport Authority executive director Christine Anderson arrived at the spaceport a day early to find WhiteKnightTwo and SpaceShipTwo stowed in the hangar.

"This was quite a feat," she said of the construction, joking with the crowd that she was glad the spacecraft fit in the cavernous hangar.

The building was designed by United Kingdom-based Foster + Partners, along with URS Corp. and New Mexico architects SMPC.

Virgin Galactic and officials with the New Mexico Spaceport Authority are touting the design as green. It uses geothermal energy; tubes running through the earthen berm surrounding part of the building help cool the interior; and natural ventilation can be used during mild seasons.

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