

What's the big deal about private space launches?

May 22 2012, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer



The Falcon 9 SpaceX rocket lifts off from space launch complex 40 at the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Cape Canaveral, Fla., early Tuesday, May 22, 2012. This launch marks the first time, a private company sends its own rocket to deliver supplies to the International Space Station.(AP Photo/John Raoux)

(AP) -- The first private spaceship is headed to the International Space Station. Some questions and answers about the cargo mission by Space Exploration Technologies, known as SpaceX:

Q: If this is just supplies and no astronauts, why is this launch such a big deal?

A: It's not the ship or what's in it that makes this important. It's who's behind it. Until now, going to and from the space station has been the job of governments, big ones at that. This is a privately built and run spaceship and it's loaded with food, clothing and equipment for the test run.

Q: What's next in this space trip?

A: The Dragon capsule is in orbit after its launch on top a Falcon 9 rocket. When it gets close to the space station on Thursday, it will do some [maneuvers](#) to show NASA that it can safely dock with the multibillion dollar giant orbital complex. If NASA gives the OK, the capsule will linkup with the space station on Friday.

Q. Is this capsule different from other cargo-hauling spacecraft?

A. This is the only one designed to return to Earth and that can be reused. After Dragon is unloaded, it will be packed up for the return trip, landing in the Pacific Ocean. Supply ships now are loaded with garbage and burn up on re-entry. Russia's [Soyuz spacecraft](#) ferry three station residents at a time; Dragon can be refigured to eventually take seven people.

Q: Has NASA stopped flying to the space station?

A: To build new rockets to eventually send people farther into space, NASA has stopped - for now - launching its own spacecraft to the space station. So it's paying Russia \$63 million a seat to taxi astronauts to the space station, and hired [private companies](#) like SpaceX to make deliveries. [SpaceX](#) promises cheaper rides when they start carrying people.

Q: When will these new [private spacecraft](#) take astronauts into space?

A: There are several companies vying for the job, all with different timetables. Many haven't finished building test rockets. SpaceX's mastermind, Elon Musk, co-founder of PayPal, is aiming to launch a crew by 2015; other firms are targeting 2016 or 2017. A good rule of thumb in the rocket business: Few early flights go even close to schedule.

Q: Will others be able to fly in space or just [astronauts](#)?

A: Private space companies are counting on real people as paying customers in space tourism eventually, but it won't be cheap. Still, experts say commercial space firms are probably the only way everyday people will get to space.

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