

Five things to know about SpaceX's flight plans

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In this Saturday, March 9, 2013, file photo, SpaceX CEO Elon Musk gives the opening keynote at the SXSW Interactive in Austin, Texas. Musk is set to unveil a new spacecraft designed to carry astronauts on Thursday, May 29, 2014, in Hawthorne, Calif. SpaceX is one of several private companies vying to develop a manned craft to replace NASA's retired space shuttle fleet. (AP Photo/Jack Plunkett, File)

SpaceX [has made supply runs](#) to the International Space Station under a NASA contract. Now it's eyeing carrying astronauts to low-Earth orbit. NASA is depending on private companies to fill the void left by the retirement of its space shuttle fleet.

Here are five things to know about SpaceX:

WHAT IS ITS HISTORY?

Space Exploration Technologies Corp., or SpaceX, was founded in 2002 by billionaire Elon Musk, who made his fortune from the sale of PayPal. It's headquartered in the city of Hawthorne in southwestern Los Angeles County near Los Angeles International Airport. SpaceX, which employs more than 3,000 people, builds rockets, unmanned capsules and manned spacecraft. Musk also heads Tesla Motors, which makes electric cars, and SolarCity, which designs and installs solar panels.

WHAT IS DRAGON?

SpaceX's Dragon became the first private spacecraft to deliver supplies to the International Space Station in 2012 and return to Earth. Up until then, only governments completed the feat. Since then, the unmanned capsule has made three more trips under contract with NASA. The version which will carry a crew is dubbed Dragon V2.

HOW DOES DRAGON V2 DIFFER FROM THE UNMANNED VERSION?

In order for astronauts to fly on the Dragon, SpaceX made tweaks and upgrades including the development of life support systems and an escape system designed to help astronauts get out of harm's way during liftoff and the trip to orbit.

WHO ARE SPACEX'S COMPETITORS?

Besides SpaceX, Boeing Co., Sierra Nevada Corp. and Blue Origin are developing "[space taxis](#)" with the goal of flying [astronauts](#) by 2017. John Logsdon, professor emeritus of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, said SpaceX and Boeing have made the most progress.

DOES SPACEX WANT TO STOP AT LOW-EARTH ORBIT?

Musk has repeatedly said he wants to see humans settle Mars and become a "multi-planet species." To achieve that, he predicts it will require the development of a next-generation rocket that boasts a methane-based propulsion system.

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