

Virgin Galactic reveals futuristic outpost for space tourism

August 15 2019, by Susan Montoya Bryan



Virgin Galactic ground crew guide the company's carrier plane into the hangar at Spaceport America following a test flight over the desert near Upham, New Mexico, on Thursday, Aug. 15, 2019. The carrier plane is now permanently based at the spaceport after arriving earlier this week. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)

Spaceport America is no longer just a shiny shell of hope that space tourism would one day launch from this remote spot in the New Mexico desert.

The once-empty hangar that anchors the taxpayer-financed launch and landing facility has been transformed into a custom-tailored headquarters where Virgin Galactic will run its commercial flight operations.

Two levels within the spaceport include mission control, a preparation area for pilots and a lounge for paying customers and their friends and families, with each element of the fit and finish paying homage to either the desert landscape that surrounds the futuristic outpost or the promise of traveling to the edge of space.

From hotel rooms to aircraft cabins, the Virgin brand touts its designs for their focus on the customer experience. Spaceport is no different.

Earthen tones help ground visitors on the first floor. The social hub includes an interactive digital walkway and a coffee bar made of Italian marble. On the upper deck, shades of white and gray speak to Virgin Galactic's more lofty mission.

Company officials, offering the first glimpse of the facility Thursday, say the space is meant to create "an unparalleled experience" as customers prepare for what Virgin Galactic describes as the journey of a lifetime.



Virgin Galactic's carrier plane makes its way across the apron in front of Spaceport America following a test flight over its new permanent home near Upham, New Mexico, on Thursday, Aug. 15, 2019. Virgin Galactic on Thursday unveiled two levels of its new digs at the spaceport, which includes a social hub where crew, pilots and customers and their families can mingle. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)

Just how soon customers will file into Virgin Galactic's newly outfitted digs for the first commercial flights has yet to be determined. A small number of test flights are still needed.

Billionaire Richard Branson, who is behind Virgin Galactic, and former

New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, a Democrat, first pitched the plan for the spaceport nearly 15 years ago.

There were construction delays and cost overruns. Virgin Galactic's spaceship development took far longer than expected and had a major setback when its first experimental craft broke apart during a 2014 test flight, killing the co-pilot.

Critics suggested the project was a boondoggle, but supporters argued that there were bound to be hard and sometimes costly lessons.

Democratic state Sen. George Munoz has enduring concerns about the business model for commercial, low-orbit travel for passengers.

"You can have all the money in the world and come back and say, 'Was my 30 seconds of fame worth that risk?'" he said.



In this Oct. 17, 2011 file photo, guests stand outside the new Spaceport America hangar in Upham, N.M. Virgin Galactic is scheduled to unveil the interior of its digs at Spaceport America, providing the first glimpse of mission control, a prep area for pilots and where paying customers will lounge ahead of their suborbital flights. Company officials are gathering Thursday, Aug. 15, 2019, at the remote facility in the New Mexico desert to show off two levels of the custom-tailored hangar at the taxpayer-financed spaceport. (AP Photo/Matt York, File)

Munoz says New Mexico's anticipated return on investment in terms of jobs and visitors is still overdue, with more than \$200 million public funds spent on Spaceport America in cooperation with Virgin Galactic as anchor tenant.

At the facility Thursday, the carrier plane for Virgin's rocket-powered passenger ship made a few passes and touch-and-goes over a runway.

Behind the spaceport's signature wall of curved glass, mission control sits on the second floor with an unobstructed view of the runway and beyond.

There's also space behind two massive sliding doors to accommodate two of Virgin Galactic's carrier planes and a fleet of six-passenger rocket ships.

Virgin Galactic posted on social media earlier this week that its carrier plane had landed in New Mexico and its main operating base was now at the spaceport. And Branson said the wing of Virgin's next rocket ship has been completed.

Virgin Galactic CEO George Whitesides said once the test flights are

complete, commercial operations can begin.



This Dec. 9, 2014 photo shows the taxiway leading to the hangar at Spaceport America in Upham, N.M. Virgin Galactic is scheduled to unveil the interior of its digs at Spaceport America, providing the first glimpse of mission control, a prep area for pilots and where paying customers will lounge ahead of their suborbital flights. Company officials are gathering Thursday, Aug. 15, 2019, at the remote facility in the New Mexico desert to show off two levels of the custom-tailored hangar at the taxpayer-financed spaceport. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan, File)

Chief Pilot Dave Mackay said the crew in the coming days will fly simulated launch missions to ensure in-flight communications and airspace coordination work as planned. The pilots also will be familiarizing themselves with New Mexico's airspace and landmarks.

"New Mexico is on track to become one of the very few places on this beautiful planet which regularly launches humans to space," Mackay said.

Branson will be among them. About 600 people have reserved a seat, according to the company, at a cost of \$250,000 a ticket.

That buys them a ride on the winged rocket ship, which is dropped in flight from the carrier airplane. Once free, it fires its rocket motor to hurtle toward the boundary of space before gliding back down.

The latest test flight reached an altitude of 56 miles (90 kilometers) while traveling at three times the speed of sound.

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