

Blue Origin launches capsule to space with astronaut perks

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In this image from video made available by Blue Origin, the company's New Shepard rocket lands after a test flight in West Texas on Thursday, Jan. 14, 2021. (Blue Origin via AP)

Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin company launched a new capsule into space Thursday to test all the astronaut perks before people strap in.

Thursday's flight with a dummy named Mannequin Skywalker lasted 10

minutes and reached 66 miles (106 kilometers) above West Texas. Both the New Shepard rocket and the capsule landed successfully.

It was the 14th flight to the fringes of space for a New Shepard rocket. The first was in 2015.

"The success of this flight puts us one really big step closer to flying astronauts," launch commentator Ariane Cornell said from company headquarters in Kent, Washington. "There's going to be a lot of fun ahead in 2021."

Blue Origin plans to launch paying passengers—tourists, scientists and professional astronauts—on brief hops over West Texas' remote desert. It's also working on a bigger rocket, New Glenn, that would blast off from Cape Canaveral as well as a lunar lander for astronauts under NASA's Artemis moon program.

The capsule soaring Thursday featured the latest crew upgrades: microphones and push-to-talk buttons for the six seats, wall panels to muffle engine noise, a safety-alert system, and temperature and humidity controls to keep passengers comfortable and the big windows free of fog.



In this image from video made available by Blue Origin, the company's RSS First Step capsule uses parachutes for landing after a test flight in West Texas on Thursday, Jan. 14, 2021. (Blue Origin via AP)

The launch and landing team was scaled back because of the pandemic.

New Shepard is named for the first American in space, Alan Shepard.
New Glenn honors John Glenn, the first American in orbit.

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