

Billionaire Richard Branson reaches space in his own ship

July 11 2021, by Susan Montoya Bryan and Marcia Dunn



Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson, left, receives a Virgin Galactic made astronaut wings pin from Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield after his flight to space from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton

Swashbuckling billionaire Richard Branson hurtled into space aboard his

own winged rocket ship Sunday, bringing astro-tourism a step closer to reality and beating out his exceedingly richer rival [Jeff Bezos](#).

The nearly 71-year-old Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space-tourism company reached an altitude of 53.5 miles (86 kilometers) over the New Mexico desert—enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and witness the curvature of the Earth—and then glided back home to a runway landing.

"The whole thing, it was just magical," a jubilant Branson said on his return aboard the gleaming white space plane, named Unity.

The brief, up-and-down flight—the space plane's portion took only about 15 minutes, or about as long as Alan Shepard's first U.S. spaceflight in 1961—was a splashy and unabashedly commercial plug for Virgin Galactic, which plans to start taking paying customers on joyrides next year.

Branson became the first person to blast off in his own spaceship, beating Bezos, the richest person on the planet, by nine days. He also became the second septuagenarian to go into space. Astronaut John Glenn flew on the shuttle at age 77 in 1998.

Bezos sent his congratulations, adding: "Can't wait to join the club!"—though he also took to Twitter a couple of days earlier to enumerate the ways in which he believes his company's tourist rides will be better.



Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson carries crew member Sirisha Bandla on his shoulders while celebrating their flight to space at Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton

With about 500 people watching, including Branson's family, Unity was carried aloft underneath a twin-fuselage aircraft. Then, at an altitude of about 8 1/2 miles (13 kilometers), Unity detached from the mother ship and fired its engine, reaching more than Mach 3, or three times the speed of sound, as it pierced the edge of space.

Spectators cheered, jumped into the air and embraced as the rocket plane touched down on Earth. Branson pumped his fists as he stepped out onto the runway and ran toward his family, bear-hugging his wife

and children and scooping up his grandchildren in his arms.

Mike Moses, a top executive at Virgin Galactic, said that apart from some problems with the transmission of video images from inside the cabin, the flight was perfect, and the ship looked pristine.

"That was an amazing accomplishment," former Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield, a one-time commander of the International Space Station, said from the sidelines. "I'm just so delighted at what this open door is going to lead to now. It's a great moment."



Richard Branson, right, answers questions while crewmates Sirisha Bandla and Colin Bennett listen during a news conference at Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Branson and the crew from his Virgin Galactic space tourism company reached an altitude of about 53 miles

(88 kilometers) over the New Mexico desert before safely gliding back home to a runway landing at Spaceport America. Credit: AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan

Virgin Galactic conducted three previous test flights into space with crews of just two or three.

The flamboyant, London-born founder of Virgin Atlantic Airways wasn't supposed to fly until later this summer. But he assigned himself to an earlier flight after Bezos announced plans to ride his own rocket into space from Texas on July 20, the 52nd anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing. Branson denied he was trying to outdo Bezos.

Branson's other chief rival in the space-tourism race among the world's richest men, SpaceX's Elon Musk, came to New Mexico to watch and congratulated Branson for a "beautiful flight."

Bezos' Blue Origin company intends to send tourists past the so-called Karman line 62 miles (100 kilometers) above Earth, which is recognized by international aviation and aerospace federations as the threshold of space.



The rocket plane carrying Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson and other crew members takes off from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton

But NASA, the Air Force, the Federal Aviation Administration and some astrophysicists consider the boundary between the atmosphere and space to begin 50 miles (80 kilometers) up.

The risks to Branson and his crew were underscored in 2007, when a rocket motor test in California's Mojave Desert left three workers dead, and in 2014, when a Virgin Galactic rocket plane broke apart during a test flight, killing one pilot and seriously injuring the other.

Ever the showman, Branson insisted on a global livestream of the Sunday

morning flight and invited celebrities and former space station astronauts to the company's Spaceport America base in New Mexico. R&B singer Khalid performed his new single "New Normal"—a nod to the dawning of space tourism—while CBS "Late Show" host Stephen Colbert served as master of ceremonies.



In this photo provided by Virgin Galactic, the VSS Unity's rocket motor burns above the Earth on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Entrepreneur Richard Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space-tourism company reached an altitude of about 53 miles (88 kilometers) over the New Mexico desert, enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and see the curvature of the Earth. Credit: Virgin Galactic via AP

Before climbing aboard, Branson, who has kite-surfed the English Channel and attempted to circle the world in a hot-air balloon, signed the

astronaut log book and wisecracked: "The name's Branson. Sir Richard Branson. Astronaut Double-oh-one. License to thrill."

But asked afterward whether he is planning any more adventures, Branson said he will "definitely give it a rest for the time being" because "I'm not sure it would be fair to put my family through another one." He said he thinks he holds the record for being pulled out of the sea five times by helicopter.

Virgin Galactic already has more than 600 reservations from would-be space tourists, with tickets initially costing \$250,000 apiece. And upon his return to Earth, Branson announced a sweepstakes drawing for two seats on a Virgin Galactic jaunt. Blue Origin is waiting for Bezos' flight before announcing its ticket prices.



Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson is greeted by school children before heading to board the rocket plane that will fly him to the edge of space from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson waves good bye while heading to board the rocket plane that will fly him to space from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



This May 29, 2018 photo made available by Virgin Galactic shows the company's VSS Unity on its second supersonic flight. After reaching nearly 50,000 feet (15,000 meters), Unity will be released from the specially designed aircraft Mothership Eve, and drop for a moment or two before its rocket motor ignites to send the craft on a steep climb toward space. Credit: Virgin Galactic via AP



The Virgin Galactic rocket plane is released by the mothership heading to space with founder Richard Branson on board seen from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



Richard Branson answers students' questions during a news conference at Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space tourism company reached an altitude of about 53 miles (88 kilometers) over the New Mexico desert before safely gliding back home to a runway landing at Spaceport America. Credit: AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan



Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson, right, is greeted by school children before heading to board the rocket plane that will fly him to the edge of space from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



Sirisha Bandla, Virgin Galactic's Vice President of Government Affairs and Research Operations, and one of the passengers accompanying Richard Branson, waves to the crowd before heading to board the rocket plane that will fly them to space from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



Richard Branson holds up a photograph of his parents during a news conference after he and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space-tourism company reached the edge of space following a launch near Truth or Consequences, N.M., on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Branson said he also carried photos of his children and others during the flight. Credit: AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan



A photographer prepares his camera as the sun rises over Spaceport America before Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson launches to space aboard his own rocket ship near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



Special guests chat as they wait for Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson's launch to space aboard his own rocket ship near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



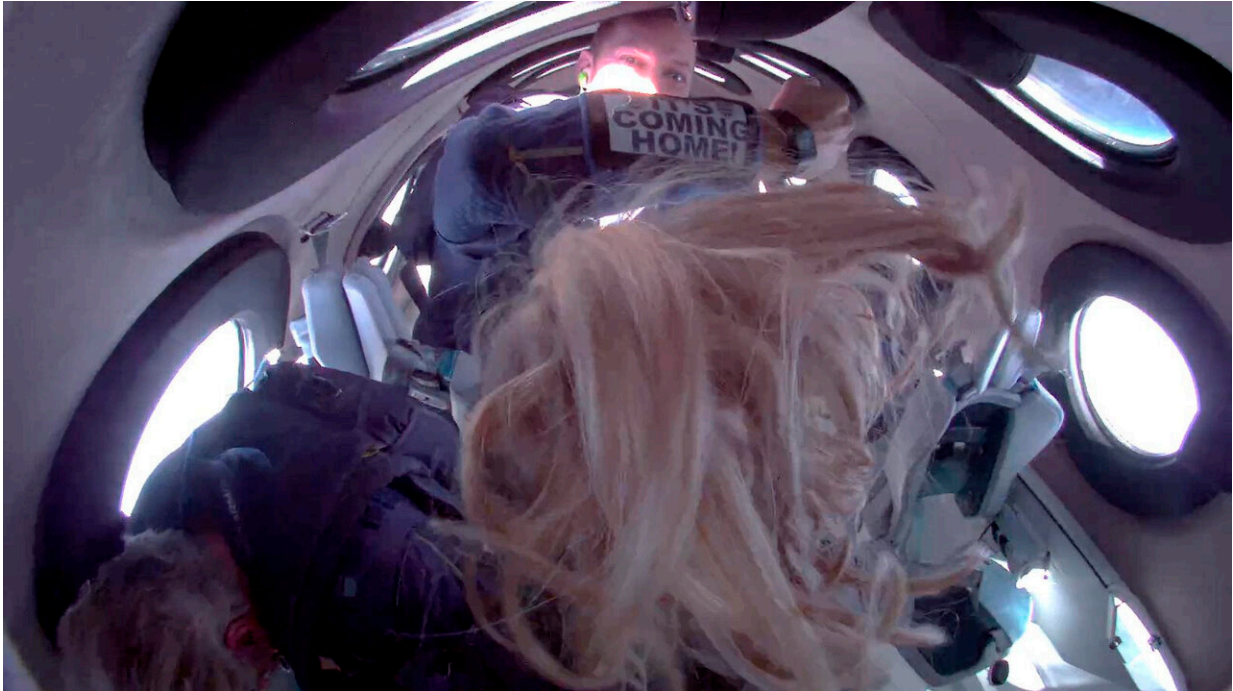
The Virgin Galactic rocket plane, with founder Richard Branson and other crew members on board, lands back in Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



Richard Branson holds up a photograph of CBS "Late Show" host Stephen Colbert during a news conference after Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space-tourism company reached the edge of space following a launch near Truth or Consequences, N.M., on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Colbert served as master of ceremonies for the launch from Spaceport America. Credit: AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan



In this photo provided by Virgin Galactic, the VSS Unity reaches a speed of Mach 3, and a space altitude of 53.5 miles above the Earth on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Entrepreneur Richard Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space-tourism company reached an altitude of about 53 miles (88 kilometers) over the New Mexico desert, enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and see the curvature of the Earth. Credit: Virgin Galactic via AP



In this photo provided by Virgin Galactic, lead operations engineer Colin Bennett, top, shows a message for @England from space as he and other crew members experience zero gravity while aboard Virgin Galactic's winged rocket ship on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Entrepreneur Richard Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space-tourism company reached an altitude of about 53 miles (88 kilometers) over the New Mexico desert, enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and see the curvature of the Earth. Credit: Virgin Galactic via AP



Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson shows his Virgin Galactic made astronaut wings pin after his flight to space from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson speaks to the crowd while celebrating their flight to space from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton



This photo provided by Virgin Galactic, shows the VSS Unity's tail cone view from space on Sunday, July 11, 2021. Entrepreneur Richard Branson and five crewmates from his Virgin Galactic space-tourism company reached an altitude of about 53 miles (88 kilometers) over the New Mexico desert, enough to experience three to four minutes of weightlessness and see the curvature of the Earth. Credit: Virgin Galactic via AP



Guests watch as the Virgin Galactic rocket plane, with founder Richard Branson on board, takes off from Spaceport America near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Sunday, July 11, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Andres Leighton

Kerianne Flynn, who signed up in 2011 to fly with Virgin Galactic, had butterflies ahead of the launch Sunday.

"I think there's going to be nothing like going up there and looking back down on the Earth, which is what I think I'm most excited about," she said. She added: "Hopefully the next generations will be able to explore what's up there."

Blue Origin and Musk's SpaceX both fly Apollo-style, using capsules atop rockets, instead of an air-launched, reusable space plane.

SpaceX, which is already launching astronauts to the space station for NASA and building moon and Mars ships, plans to take tourists on more than just brief, up-and-down trips. Customers will instead go into orbit around the Earth for days, with seats costing well into the millions. The company's first private flight is set for September.

Musk himself has not committed to going into space anytime soon.

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