

# Party time: Champagne and celebrities mark Branson's space flight

July 12 2021, by Lucie Aubourg

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Champagne flowed, guests cheered and Grammy-nominated singer Khalid debuted a new single: British billionaire Richard Branson threw

himself a party in the desert to mark his successful first flight into space.

The eccentric septuagenarian founder of Virgin Galactic arrived before dawn at Spaceport America, built in large part at his initiative, in the US state of New Mexico.

The sun rose on the building's futuristic glass facade, located in a region that boasts 340 days of good weather per year.

A small crowd of invited guests, baking under the hot sun, cheered as the [space](#) crew climbed into a black SUV and headed for the rocket, which sat at the end of a 3.6 kilometer (2.2 miles) track. On board were Branson, two pilots and three other Virgin Galactic employees.

Also on hand, though unseen by the cameras, was SpaceX founder Elon Musk, another billionaire with galactic aspirations.

A TikTok star, a celebrity television presenter and a Canadian astronaut were among those poised, ready to commentate on the momentous event.

After the launch, the huge carrier plane climbed through the air for about 50 minutes. The guests took refuge under a white tent, eating passed hors d'oeuvres while children ran about.

But they soon rushed back out again to witness the main event: the spaceship released from the plane, igniting its engine for a supersonic ascent to shouts of joy from the Earth-bound watchers.



Virgin Galactic founder Sir Richard Branson(L), celebrates with crew members after flying into space aboard a Virgin Galactic vessel.

"Welcome to space!" the commentator announced a few minutes later, just before the ship began its descent.

Branson's face filled the big screen, streamed in from the rocket: "I was once a child with a dream, looking up to the stars. Now I'm an adult in a spaceship!" he said to the crowd.

## **Wings and free tickets**

As the ship came back to Earth, Khalid took to the stage. Millions of

listeners tuned in to hear him debut his newest song, "New Normal"—a wink towards future space tourism.



As the space ship came back to Earth, music star Khalid took to the stage.

Once the landing was complete and the rocket parked only a few meters from the stage, Branson arrived.

After hugging his family, he stepped up on the platform to give out their astronaut wings, official Federal Aviation Administration pins shaped like wings to symbolize their new status as astronauts.



Branson then popped open the champagne, liberally spraying it over himself and his crewmates before drinking it straight from the bottle.



Astronaut Chris Hadfield holds a pair of the FAA astronaut wings presented to the Virgin Galactic crew members.

The consummate showman, he also unveiled a competition for space enthusiasts to win two free tickets on Virgin Galactic flights through the website Omaze—and a personal guided tour of Spaceport America.

"I promise lots of chocolate," he joked, comparing himself to Willy Wonka, the Roald Dahl character. "We're here to make (space) accessible to all."

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