

Virgin Orbit successfully launches 7 satellites into orbit

January 14 2022, by John Antczak

A Virgin Orbit rocket released from a jet flying off the California coast carried seven small satellites into space on Thursday as the company kicked off a year in which it plans to ramp up the pace of launches, including two originating from Britain.

Virgin Orbit's modified Boeing 747 took off from Mojave Air & Space Port in the Southern California desert, flew out over the Pacific Ocean and dropped the LauncherOne rocket from its left wing.

The 70-foot-long (21.3-meter) booster ignited at an altitude of about 35,000 feet (10,668 meters) and hurtled skyward. The company later confirmed that all of the satellites were successfully deployed into the proper orbit.

"Another fantastic day for the Virgin Orbit team, and a big step forward for our customers," the company tweeted.

The payload included satellites for the U.S. Defense Department, the Polish company SatRevolution and the international company Spire Global.

It was Virgin Orbit's third launch carrying satellites for customers. Two previous launches carried multiple satellites into orbit in January and June 2021. The company's first launch, a demonstration flight, failed in May 2020.

Virgin Orbit, founded in 2017 by British billionaire Richard Branson, went public last month. The company is targeting the market for launching small satellites. It touts the mobility of its air-launch system compared to the limitations of fixed launch sites.

"The tremendous thing about using a 747 is we can put them into any orbit from anywhere in the world," Branson said from the British Virgin Islands during the company's launch webcast.

"There's only I think a couple of handfuls of countries that have the capability of sending satellites to space from their own countries and now all 180 countries can use Virgin Orbit," he said. "You just need to ring us up."

The company plans six launches this year, including two for the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force that will originate from Cornwall in southwestern England. RAF test pilot Mathew "Stanny" Stannard flew the 747 from the main pilot seat on Thursday.

"This is going to be just a banner year for us," Chief Operating Officer Tony Gingiss said in a preflight briefing this week.

Gingiss said there has been continuous improvement flight-over-flight.

"I think we're seeing not only the kind of rigor we expect but just really getting highly confident in our processes," he said.

Thursday's mission was dubbed "Above the Clouds," a title taken from a track on hip hop duo Gang Starr's album "Moment of Truth," which was released by Virgin Records in 1998.

Branson noted during his interview that his family got COVID-19 over Christmas.

"Fortunately we were vaccinated and boosted and therefore none of us got it badly," he said.

This story was first published on January 13, 2022. It was updated on January 16, 2022, to correct a quote by Richard Branson. He said 180 countries can use Virgin Orbit, not 480.

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