

Virgin Galactic's first space tourists finally soar, an Olympian and a mother-daughter duo

August 10 2023, by SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN and MARCIA DUNN



This photo provided Virgin Galactic shows passengers during Virgin Galactic's first space tourism flight on Thursday Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic rocketed to the edge of space with its first tourists Thursday. The space plane glided back to a runway landing at Spaceport America in the New Mexico desert, after a brief flight that gave passengers a few minutes of weightlessness. Credit: Virgin Galactic via AP

Virgin Galactic rocketed to the edge of space with its first tourists Thursday, a former British Olympian who bought his ticket 18 years ago and a mother-daughter duo from the Caribbean.

The [space plane](#) glided back to a runway landing at Spaceport America in the New Mexico desert, after a brief flight that gave passengers a few minutes of weightlessness.

This first private customer flight had been delayed for years; its success means Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic can now start offering monthly rides, joining Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin and Elon Musk's SpaceX in the space tourism business.

"That was by far the most awesome thing I've ever done in my life," said Jon Goodwin, who competed in canoeing in the 1972 Olympics.

Goodwin, 80, was among the first to buy a Virgin Galactic ticket in 2005 and feared, after later being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, that he'd be out of luck. Since then he's climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and cycled back down, and said he hopes his spaceflight shows others with Parkinson's and other illnesses that "it doesn't stop you doing things."

Ticket prices were \$200,000 when Goodwin signed up. The cost is now \$450,000.

He was joined on the flight by sweepstakes winner Keisha Schahaff, 46, a health coach from Antigua, and her daughter, Anastatia Mayers, 18, a student at Scotland's University of Aberdeen. They high-fived and pumped their fists as the spaceport crowd cheered their return.



Virgin Galactic's rocket-powered plane Unity 22, left, flies past its mothership Eve on its way to the edge of space after taking off from Spaceport America, near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic is taking its first space tourists on a long-delayed rocket ship ride. Credit: AP Photo/Andrés Leighton

"A childhood dream has come true," said Schahaff, who took pink Antiguan sand up with her. Added her daughter: "I have no words. The only thought I had the whole time was 'Wow!' "

With the company's astronaut trainer and one of the two pilots, it marked the first time women outnumbered men on a spaceflight, four to two.

Cheers erupted from families and friends watching below when the craft's rocket motor fired after it was released from the twin-fuselage aircraft that had carried it aloft. The rocket ship's portion of the flight lasted about 15 minutes and it reached 55 miles (88 kilometers) high.

It was Virgin Galactic's seventh trip to space since 2018, but the first with a ticket-holder. Branson, the company's founder, hopped on board for the first full-size crew ride in 2021. Italian military and government researchers [soared in June](#) on the first commercial flight. About 800 people are currently on Virgin Galactic's waiting list, according to the company.



Virgin Galactic's rocket-powered plane Unity 22, lands after a short flight to the edge of space at Spaceport America, near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic is taking its first space tourists on a long-delayed rocket ship ride. Credit: AP Photo/Andrés Leighton

In contrast to Virgin Galactic's plane-launched rocket ship, the capsules used by SpaceX and Blue Origin are fully automated and parachute back down.

Like Virgin Galactic, Blue Origin aims for the fringes of space, quick ups-and-downs from West Texas. Blue Origin has launched 31 people so far, but flights are on hold following a rocket crash last fall. The capsule, carrying experiments but no passengers, landed intact.

SpaceX, is the only private company flying customers all the way to orbit, charging a much heftier price, too: tens of millions of dollars per seat. It's already flown three private crews. NASA is its biggest customer, relying on SpaceX to ferry its astronauts to and from the International Space Station. since 2020.

People have been taking on adventure travel for decades, the risks underscored by the [recent implosion of the Titan submersible](#) that killed five passengers on their way down to view the Titanic wreckage. Virgin Galactic suffered its own casualty in 2014 when its rocket plane broke apart during a test flight, killing one pilot. Yet space tourists are still lining up, ever since the first one rocketed into orbit in 2001 with the Russians.



Virgin Galactic's mothership Eve, carrying the rocket-powered plane Unity 22,

flies after taking off from Spaceport America, near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic is taking its first space tourists on a long-delayed rocket ship ride. Credit: AP Photo/Andrés Leighton



Space tourists, from left, Anastatia Mayers, Jon Goodwin and Keisha Schahaff pose for photos before boarding their Virgin Galactic flight at Spaceport America, near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic is taking its first space tourists on a long-delayed rocket ship ride. Credit: AP Photo/Andrés Leighton



Guests wave flags of Antigua and Barbuda while watching the return of Virgin Galactic's rocket-powered plane Unity at Spaceport America, near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic is taking its first space tourists on a long-delayed rocket ship ride, including a British former Olympian and a mother-daughter duo from the Caribbean island. Credit: AP Photo/Andrés Leighton



Space tourists, from left, Anastatia Mayers, Jon Goodwin and Keisha Schahaff walk to the tarmac before boarding their Virgin Galactic flight at Spaceport America, near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic is taking its first space tourists on a long-delayed rocket ship ride.
Credit: AP Photo/Andrés Leighton



Virgin Galactic's mothership Eve, carrying the rocket-powered plane Unity 22, takes off from Spaceport America, near Truth or Consequences, N.M., Thursday, Aug. 10, 2023. Virgin Galactic is taking its first space tourists on a long-delayed rocket ship ride. Credit: AP Photo/Andrés Leighton

Branson, who lives in the British Virgin Islands, watched Thursday's [flight](#) from a party in Antigua. He was joined by the country's prime minister, as well as Schahaff's mother and other relatives.

"Welcome to the club," he told the new spacefliers via X, formerly Twitter.

Several months ago, Branson held a virtual lottery to establish a pecking order for the company's first 50 customers—dubbed the Founding

Astronauts. Virgin Galactic said the group agreed Goodwin would go first, given his age and his Parkinson's.

Correction note: This story has been updated to correct introductory price to \$200,000, not \$250,000.

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