

Blue Origin announces space launch next week, first since 2022 crash

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Blue Origin's New Shepard lifts off from the launch pad carrying 90-year-old Star Trek actor William Shatner and three other civilians on October 13, 2021 near Van Horn, Texas.

Blue Origin said on Tuesday it was aiming to launch its New Shepard suborbital rocket next week, the first mission since an uncrewed crash in September 2022 set back the space company owned by billionaire Jeff

Bezos.

"We're targeting a launch window that opens on Dec. 18 for our next New Shepard payload mission," the company tweeted on X, adding the flight would contain 33 science and research payloads, as well as 38,000 postcards.

But the launch first needs to be cleared by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which said in a statement to AFP it is "continuing to work on outstanding items related to the license modification application." A Blue Origin spokesperson said "we expect to receive approval."

In September the FAA announced it had closed its probe into last year's crash, ordering the company to carry out 21 corrective actions before it could resume launches.

The report said failure of an engine nozzle caused by higher-than-expected engine operating temperatures caused the New Shepard rocket to fall back to the ground shortly after liftoff, even as the capsule carrying research experiments escaped and floated safely back to Earth.

"During the mishap the onboard launch vehicle systems detected the anomaly, triggered an abort and separation of the capsule from the propulsion module as intended and shut down the engine," said the FAA.

The fact the capsule ejected right away was viewed positively, suggesting that any crew would have been safe if they had been aboard.

In all, Blue Origin has flown six crewed flights—some passengers were paying customers and others flew as guests—since July 2021, when Bezos himself took part in the first flight.

While Blue Origin has been grounded, rival Virgin Galactic, the company founded by British billionaire Richard Branson, has pressed on, flying five commercial flights this year.

The two companies compete in the emerging space tourism sector, offering a few minutes of weightlessness in "suborbital" space.

While Blue Origin launches a small rocket vertically, Virgin Galactic uses a large carrier plane to gain altitude and then drop off a smaller rocket-powered spaceplane that completes the journey to space.

Virgin Galactic tickets were sold for between \$200,000-\$450,000, while Blue Origin doesn't disclose its ticket prices publicly.

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