

# Blue Origin flies thrill seekers to space, including oldest astronaut

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Blue Origin saw its first crewed launch since a rocket mishap in 2022 left rival Virgin Galactic as the sole operator in the fledgling suborbital tourism market.

After a nearly two-year hiatus, Blue Origin flew adventurers to space on Sunday, including a former Air Force pilot who was denied the chance

to be the United States' first Black astronaut decades ago.

It was the first crewed launch for the enterprise owned and founded by Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos since a rocket mishap in 2022 left rival Virgin Galactic as the sole operator in the fledgling suborbital tourism market.

Six people including the sculptor Ed Dwight, who was on track to become NASA's first astronaut of color in the 1960s before being controversially spurned, launched around 09:36 am local time (1436 GMT) from the Launch Site One base in west Texas, a live feed showed.

Dwight—at 90 years, 8 months and 10 days—became the oldest person to ever go to space.

"This is a life-changing experience, everybody needs to do this," he exclaimed after the flight.

"I thought I didn't really need this in my life," he added, reflecting on his omission from the astronaut corps, which was his first experience with failure as a young man.

"But I lied," he added, with a hearty laugh.

"You take everything you imagined, you multiply it roughly by 100 and you are still quite far from reality," crewmate and French entrepreneur Sylvain Chiron told AFP.

"I'm not quite back down to Earth yet."



One of the Blue Origin capsule's three parachutes failed to fully inflate, possibly resulting in a harder landing than expected.

Mission NS-25 is the seventh human flight for Blue Origin, which sees short jaunts on the New Shepard suborbital vehicle as a stepping stone to greater ambitions, including the development of a full-fledged heavy rocket and lunar lander.

Including Sunday's crew, the company has flown 37 people aboard New Shepard—a small, fully reusable rocket system named after Alan Shepard, the first American in space.

## **Second nonagenarian**

The program encountered a setback when a New Shepard rocket caught fire shortly after launch on September 12, 2022, even though the uncrewed capsule ejected safely.

A federal investigation revealed an overheating engine nozzle was at fault. Blue Origin took corrective steps and carried out a successful uncrewed launch in December 2023, paving the way for Sunday's mission.

After liftoff, the sleek and roomy capsule separated from the booster, which produces zero carbon emissions. The rocket performed a precision vertical landing.

As the spaceship soared beyond the Karman Line, the internationally recognized boundary of space 62 miles (100 kilometers) above sea level, passengers had the chance to marvel at the Earth's curvature and unbuckle their seatbelts to float—or somersault—during a few minutes of weightlessness.

The capsule then reentered the atmosphere, deploying its parachutes for a desert landing in a puff of sand. However, one of the three parachutes failed to fully inflate, possibly resulting in a harder landing than expected.

Asked for comment, a Blue Origin spokesperson stressed its system was designed with multiple fail-safes.



'This is a life-changing experience, everybody needs to do this,' Ed Dwight exclaimed after his Blue Origin flight to space.

"The capsule is designed to safely land with one parachute. The overall mission was a success, and all of our astronauts are excited to be back," the spokesperson said.

In all, the mission lasted around 11 minutes roundtrip.

Bezos himself was on the program's first crewed flight in 2021. A few months later, Star Trek's William Shatner blurred the lines between science fiction and reality when he became the world's oldest astronaut at age 90, decades after he first played a space traveler.

## To space, finally

Dwight, who was almost two months older than Shatner at the time of his flight, became only the second nonagenarian to venture beyond Earth.

Astronaut John Glenn remains the oldest to orbit the planet, a feat he achieved in 1998 at the age of 77 aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery.

Sunday's mission finally gave Dwight the chance he was denied decades ago.

He was an elite test pilot when he was appointed by then-president John F Kennedy to join a highly competitive Air Force program known as a Pathway for the astronaut corps, but was ultimately not picked.

He left the military in 1966, citing the strain of racial politics, before dedicating his life to telling Black history through sculpture. His art, displayed around the country, includes iconic figures like Martin Luther King Jr, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and more.

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