

Blue Origin flies thrill seekers to space after two year hiatus

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Mission NS-25 is the seventh human flight for the enterprise owned and founded by Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos.

Blue Origin flew adventurers to the final frontier on Sunday for the first

time in nearly two years, reigniting competition in the space tourism market after a rocket mishap put its crewed operations on hold.

Six people including Black sculptor and former Air Force pilot Ed Dwight, who was controversially spurned by NASA's astronaut corps in the 1960s, launched around 9:36 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 go to space, narrowly pipping Star Trek actor William Shatner, who was almost two months younger when he launched with Blue Origin in 2021.

Mission NS-25 is the seventh human flight for the enterprise owned and founded by Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos, who 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.

"I was the first guy in the world to be famous for not doing something," Dwight joked ahead of launch. "Needless to say, I'm overwhelmed."

To date, Blue Origin has flown 31 people aboard New Shepard—a small, fully reusable rocket system named after Alan Shepard, the first American in space.



Sunday's mission finally gives Ed Dwight, third from left, the chance to go to space which he was denied decades ago.

Second nonagenarian

The program encountered a setback when a New Shepard rocket caught fire shortly after launch on September 12, 2022. The uncrewed capsule ejected in time, meaning astronauts would have been safe had they flown.

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 marveled at the Earth's curvature and had the chance to unbuckle their seats to float 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 deploy, resulting in a harder landing than expected.

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



French entrepreneur Sylvain Chiron, one of the crew, told AFP he was most excited about "this sensation of leaving the world of men, and seeing the Earth as a whole, from above, without borders, with all its fragility and beauty"

Dwight became only the second nonagenarian to venture beyond Earth.

Ticket prices are a well-guarded secret, but guests like Dwight ride for free.

To space, finally

Blue Origin's competitor in suborbital space is Virgin Galactic, which deploys a supersonic spaceplane that is dropped from beneath the wings

of a massive carrier plane at high altitude.

Virgin Galactic experienced its own two-year safety pause because of an anomaly linked with the 2021 flight that carried its founder British tycoon Richard Branson into space. But the company later hit its stride with half a dozen successful flights in quick succession.

Its next mission is set for June, after which it will head into another pause to build out a new class of advanced spaceplane.

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

He was an elite test pilot when he was appointed by 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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