

With Virgin Galactic's Latest Flight, Has Space Tourism Finally Arrived?

On Thursday, pilots Mark Stucky and Frederick Sturckow [became the first humans](#) to reach outer space from an American launch since the last space shuttle mission in 2011. It was a major milestone for [Virgin Galactic](#), which has been aiming for this day since it was founded in 2004.

Though more test flights remain, the company looks on track to carry its first paying customers into suborbital space in 2019. Those customers would be the first space tourists since 2009, when the Russian space agency took billionaire Cirque du Soleil cofounder Guy Laliberté to the International Space Station. In the year that followed, the Russian agency canceled its tourism program due to expanded crew sizes on the ISS. Virgin's customers won't need to be billionaires, but they will need to have access to a good amount of cash, as it's been selling tickets for \$250,000.

In the years since 2009, there has been a lot of talk among space enthusiasts that commercial spaceflight could get people into space soon. But it turned out to be slower going than some expected. Companies sprang up to try and fill the need. Some, like XCOR Aerospace, ended up out of business. Others shifted focus from crewed spaceflight to satellites and scientific payloads. Virgin Galactic itself suffered a major setback when its [first spacecraft was destroyed](#) during a test flight in 2014, killing one of its pilots.

Right now, Virgin Galactic has only one other competitor for suborbital spaceflights, and that's Jeff Bezos' space company [Blue Origin](#), which plans to sell suborbital flights on its *New Shepard* spacecraft. Blue Origin has had several successful uncrewed flights on that ship, though it's not clear yet when it intends to begin launching customers. It has targeted crewed test flights next year.

Bezos and Branson are building the ships. The next question is: Will anyone fly them? Chad Anderson, the CEO of [Space Angels](#), a venture firm focused on the space industry, is optimistic.

"I think there will be a lot of people who want to do that," he told *Forbes*. "A lot of people have put down deposits and Virgin thinks they can raise prices—so that gives you a sense of their confidence in being able to charge more and get customers in the door."

Ostrove concurs and thinks that Virgin is already well positioned. "There does appear to be a large enough market to enable Virgin Galactic to make regular flights. The company already has an estimated 700 customers that have prepaid for flights to space. More will likely sign on as systems are proven to be able to safely and regularly carry passengers into space."

Beyond suborbital flights, the next frontier for space tourism is for orbital flights—and even beyond. Both Boeing and SpaceX are developing crewed spaceships capable of ferrying

astronauts to the International Space Station, and both companies are conducting test flights of those ships next year. SpaceX has already announced that it's [sold a trip around the Moon](#) to Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa, and the company is very open about its ambition to [take people to Mars](#). And in November, the *Washington Post* reported that NASA itself is [considering a proposal](#) to sell tickets to the International Space Station.

Tickets for commercial space travel won't come cheap—at least at first. Blue Origin's tickets are likely to be similarly priced to Virgin Galactic's \$250,000. Neither SpaceX nor Boeing have released numbers for what it would cost to take an orbital flight or a trip to the ISS, but it would likely be tens of millions of dollars (Laliberté's flight to the station cost \$35 million). For his part, Anderson thinks space tourism will become affordable.

“Even at high price points, people are willing to pay, which shows the market will open up,” he said. “To use an analogy, if you look at commercial airlines, in the beginning the prices were super-high. Only celebrities and politicians were able to fly. It took 25-30 years before a coach class was even an option to be affordable. If you look to the airline industry you can see how this will grow.”

“People have been estimating that we are a year away from space tourism flights for years now,” aerospace analyst Bill Ostrove told me in an email. “But with the successful flight, it appears that we really are less than a year away from commercial space flights.”

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