

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

Is leisure space travel already here?

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Sir Richard Branson on the VSS Unity. Image credit: Virgin Galactic

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Competition in the commercial space flight arena is reaching new heights, as leisure space travel becomes closer to reality.

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On July 11, spaceflight company **Virgin Galactic** successfully completed its first test flight with a full crew, including its founder, Sir Richard Branson. Space tourism has become something akin to a pet project among tech billionaires, with Jeff Bezos' Blue Origins and Elon Musk's SpaceX also set to launch commercial service.

"This was absolutely a turning point because the flight shows that commercial spaceflight is now a reality," said Jane Poynter, founder and co-CEO of luxury spaceflight experience company **Space Perspective**, Florida.

"Richard Branson and his team have been working towards this goal for many years and coupled with the recent successful test flights of Space Perspective and Blue Origin, it is clear that space is opening up to everyone, not just trained astronauts," she said.

Space tourism takes off

Luxury travel is increasingly centered on the experiential, with unique excursions highly sought after among the ultra-affluent. Naturally, ambitious travelers and explorers have looked to space, where tourism will soon be possible for those with deep pockets.

Soon following Mr. Branson into space is Mr. Bezos, founder of ecommerce giant Amazon and aerospace company **Blue Origin**.

The tech tycoon is scheduled to take an 11-minute trip on the New Shepard on July 20, along with his brother; Wally Funk, an 82-year-old aviator and alumna of the Mercury 13 "Women in Space" program and an undisclosed auction winner who bid \$28 million to join the rocket's first human flight.

Virgin Galactic plays up the emotional aspects of space flight

SpaceX, owned by Tesla founder Mr. Musk, became the first private company to successfully launch, orbit and recover a spacecraft in 2010. In the decade since, SpaceX has established a close relationship with NASA and made several trips to the International Space Station (ISS).

Leveraging these relationships, SpaceX and space tourism company Axiom Space are partnering to send four private crews to the ISS through 2023. SpaceX is also set to send its first civilian crew into space orbiting above the ISS as soon as this September.

The ISS is found about 248 miles above the Earth, while Blue Origin is set to reach an elevation of 62 miles to Virgin Galactic's 55 miles.

According to [Business Insider](#), about 600 people have reserved tickets, costing up to \$250,000 to fly with Virgin Galactic. Tickets for SpaceX's commercial flights to the ISS are estimated to cost \$55 million for the eight-day trips.

Ticket prices typically include at least the space flight and required training, while some longer experiences may also include food, safety support, space suits and more in the price tags.

Space tourism company [Space Adventures](#), another SpaceX partner, has sent eight private flights to the ISS on Russia's Soyuz spacecraft since 2001. Clients have lived and worked alongside the professional astronauts for 10 days or more.

Space Adventures is also offering the chance for someone to become the first private citizen to complete a spacewalk on a 2023 Soyuz mission to the ISS.

With more ways for space tourists to take flight, literally, there are new companies identifying other opportunities within the sector.

The United Kingdom-based [Rocket Breaks](#) is looking to offer bespoke packages for luxury clients exploring their space travel options.

In 2018, the now-seemingly defunct technology startup Orion Span revealed plans to launch the first space hotel in late 2021 ([see story](#)). According to [Space News](#), by 2019, Orion Span had received 26 refundable deposits from clients hoping to stay at Aurora Station.



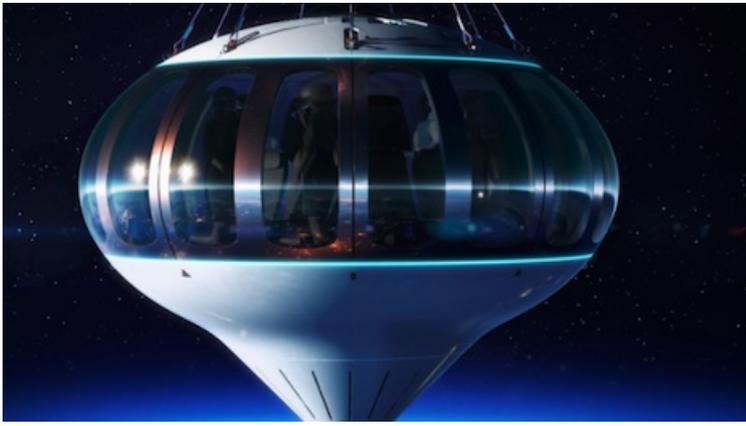
Several companies have aspired to create the first luxury space hotel. Image credit: VoyagerStation

Hopes for a space hotel are not entirely dashed, however, as the Gateway Foundation and Orbital Assembly Corporation are developing the first commercial space station.

Early plans of [Voyager Station](#) show a circular structure formed by rings of large, connected, pressurized modules. Privately-owned modules would be able to be used as restaurants, hotels, villas and more.

For those interested in less intense space travel, Space Perspective sold out its 2024 spaceflights within weeks of opening reservations.

Tickets to board Spaceship Neptune are priced at \$125,000 each. The spacecraft reaches an altitude of 100,000 feet, or about 19 miles, where travelers can soak in the 360-degree views of planet Earth, recline in their seats, walk around, eat and drink for a six-hour flight ([see story](#)).



Space Perspective is still accepting reservations for 2025 space flights. Image credit: Space Perspective

"For Space Perspective, the difference is that our experience is slow and gentle, even while being the thrill of a lifetime," Ms. Poynter said. "There is no rigorous training required, no high g-forces.

"We can personalize the experience for each explorer, to the music they want to listen to, to the people they travel with," she said. "In addition, the pre- and post-flight experience can be as luxurious as the explorer wishes, from luxury accommodations and private yachts picking them up from the recovery ship."

Final frontier for luxury travel

Luxury experiences are central to the travel and hospitality industries, in which consumers are less likely to spend money on physical products. Instead, the focus is on services, amenities and unusual experiences.

Affluents today not only have access to some of the best and most unique products on the market, but they are also able to spend time and money on experiences not available to the average consumer.

For instance, Triton Submarines faced a number of technological hurdles and met rigorous requirements and regulations on the way to developing safe submarines for personal use.

The company's most popular model costs \$3.6 million and sits three people. Other models can hold more passengers or dive to lower depths ([see story](#)).

With these experiences resonating with affluent consumers, space travel may hold even more appeal for the ultra-affluent who are seeking adventure and uniqueness. The increased competition may also make space tourism more accessible, relatively speaking.

"We think that space is desirable for many people, not just the affluent," Space Perspective's Ms. Poynter said.

"There are people from all over the world that dreamed of going to space when they were kids, and have always been glued to their televisions when rockets were sent to space," she said. "But most people thought it would never be accessible to them."

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