

SPACE TRIPPING '08

Janice Kleinschmidt and Abbie Kozolchyk



[LAUNCH SLIDESHOW](#)

© Virgin Galactic SpaceShip Two

Virgin Galactic shoots for the stratosphere

Sir Richard Branson stole NASA's thunder. The day the venerable agency marked its 50th anniversary, the media instead heralded new, non-NASA developments in aviation. The previous day, July 28, 2008, Branson's eight-year-old Virgin Galactic enterprise unveiled the mother ship that will take paying passengers into orbit.

"The most important thing is to get people up there safely and make sure they have a return ticket," said Branson, sporting a white Banana Republic shirt with the Virgin Galactic logo on the chest and a "DNA of flight" graphic on the back yoke. He'd just spent a few hours entertaining a gaggle of reporters at Mojave Airport in the California high desert. Safety was a hot topic, but Virgin is very much about fun. "I wouldn't be surprised if [on commercial space flights down the road] we had a flight attendant massaging upside down in the air," he added.

His mother, Eve, was on hand to christen the mother ship named in her honor. "Everything he does is fun," she said. "He doesn't do anything the normal way."

Perhaps that's why Branson has hosted customers who have committed to the \$200,000 ride into sub-orbital space aboard VG's **SpaceShip Two** on his private island of Necker and to Sweden to see the aurora borealis. And perhaps anticipation of news coming from the Monday morning press event led to impulse ticket buying by nearly two dozen future astronauts over the weekend, bringing the number of reservations to 270.

For \$200,000, passengers won't even get free peanuts and sodas. In fact, their diets will be controlled during preflight training "to make sure they feel great during the flight," says Virgin Galactic commercial director Stephen Attenborough. A couple of days' preflight preparation will include a medical check, bonding with the Virgin Galactic team, review of safety procedures and G-force training. "Our goal is to make sure they get off the plane with a big smile on their face," Attenborough says. If the flight doesn't do the trick, surely the post-flight celebration and astronaut-wings ceremony will.

Although reservations can be made for as little as a \$20,000 deposit, the first 100 passengers who pay in full—christened the "Founders"—will be given seats according to lottery, with six passengers per trip. Those scheduled for subsequent flights will train by going up with SpaceShip Two to about 50,000 feet in **Virgin Mother Ship Eve**; SS2 passengers ascend another 310,000 feet. According to Attenborough, friends and family may potentially ride in the mother ship (each fuselage also holds six passengers). "In time," he adds, "it could become a fun place to do some Gs."

As for traveling attire, the crafts are pressurized, so passengers need not wear bulky, unflattering spacesuits. Instead they will be issued "something that looks great and is functional," says Attenborough.

The interior is still in development, though it promises to be roomy. "The cabin could take 11 people to space, but Richard wants to sell only window seats," says Virgin Galactic president Will Whitehorn. Adds Branson's nephew, Ned

Abel Smith, “We don’t want to take away from the experience by over-designing the interior.” Still, noted designer Philippe Starck is on-board as a consultant.

Virgin isn't the only player in the commercial space flight game. **Space Adventures** has been delivering private citizens to the International Space Station since 2001, when billionaire Dennis Tito took the first trip. (Tito's ticket cost just \$20 million; the ride now runs a cool \$30 million.) Next up is Richard Garriott, son of NASA astronaut Owen Garriott, scheduled to fly in October. Passengers may eventually be allowed to take a walk outside the space station for an additional \$15 million. As Space Adventures CEO Eric Anderson notes, that's “something very few professional astronauts have done.”

Anderson even hopes to whirl customers around the moon, where only 24 humans have been. At some point in the next four years, he expects, number 25 will pony up \$100 million for that bragging right. “This is the most expensive travel offering I know of,” he says.

At \$4 million (give or take), a vacation at **Galactic Suite** is a comparative bargain. Projected to open in 2012, the first space resort promises to orbit 15 times a day at 18,000 mph. The trip requires an 18-week commitment, most of which is spent at a James Bond-style space camp on an undisclosed Caribbean island. “Galactic Suite is really tapping into the fantasy aspect,” says Michael Yessis, co-editor of World Hum, a Travel Channel website. “Who wouldn’t want to be launched into orbit Bond-style, saying something pithy in a tux or evening gown?”

Not everyone thinks space travel should be a luxury endeavor. “It’s time to open the space frontier to citizen explorers,” says Buzz Aldrin, the second man to set foot on the moon and a dignitary at the unveiling of Virgin Galactic’s mother ship. Working through his **ShareSpace Foundation**, Aldrin hopes to put space travel within anybody’s reach. “We intend to launch the ShareSpace Adventure Awards program to award winners with actual trips in space.”

Branson has his own incentive for the lower-flying passengers of his Virgin America airline. “Elevate” frequent flyers who earn 10,000 points will have an

opportunity to compete in a series of challenges, the winner of which wins a seat on SpaceShip Two. Now that's a serious upgrade.