

# Virgin Galactic opens ‘Gateway to Space’ for tourist launches at Spaceport America

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Virgin Galactic’s new home for tourist flights to suborbital space is now go for launch.

The spaceflight company unveiled the mostly completed interior of its “Gateway to Space” building here at Spaceport America today (Aug. 15), showcasing communal areas where passengers will gear up for their flights as well as the spaceflight-operations sector housing mission control.

The progress on this interior work “means that Spaceport America’s Gateway to Space is now functionally operational – ready to host the remaining portion of Virgin Galactic’s test-flight program before welcoming its very first future astronauts,” Virgin Galactic representatives said in a statement today.

“It’s just a wonderful, special day for us,” Virgin Galactic CEO George Whitesides told reporters here this morning. “It’s just a really important day, to share with you some of the progress and to declare operational readiness.”

Virgin Galactic’s spaceflight system consists of a carrier aircraft called WhiteKnightTwo and the six-passenger SpaceShipTwo space plane. WhiteKnightTwo takes off from a runway, hauling the space plane up to an altitude of about 50,000 feet (15,000 meters). At that point, SpaceShipTwo drops free and engages its rocket motor, powering itself to suborbital space.

Passengers aboard the space plane will experience a few minutes of weightlessness and get great views of Earth against the blackness of space before returning to Earth for a runway landing.

A ticket to ride SpaceShipTwo currently costs \$250,000, and more than 600 people have put down a deposit to reserve a seat, Virgin Galactic representatives have said.

The company is well into the test-flight program with the current iterations of WhiteKnightTwo and SpaceShipTwo, which are known as VMS Eve and VSS Unity, respectively. Unity reached suborbital space for the first time in December 2018 and did it again in February of this year, earning five people – pilots Mark “Forger” Stucky, CJ Sturckow, Dave Mackay and Mike “Sooch” Masucci, and chief astronaut instructor Beth Moses – their commercial astronaut wings.

Those landmark flights, and the others leading up to them, took off from Mojave Air and Space Port in southeastern California. But the final phases of the test campaign will be carried out here in New Mexico.

