

VIRGIN GALACTIC SCHEDULES COMMERCIAL FLIGHTS FOR THE END OF JUNE



After years of delaying, space tourism company Virgin Galactic hopes to take its first customers into space soon. It promises to launch its commercial flights into space within a few weeks, at the end of June. In recent years, the company has already pre-sold some 800 tickets: 600 between 2005 and 2014 for a price between \$ 200,000 and \$ 250,000, and 200 additional more recently, for \$ 450,000 each. Unfortunately, despite the tidy sum paid, these buyers had to wait. The space program needs to catch up to schedule following a fatal accident in 2014.

The first mission, Unity 25, should begin with four company employees at the end of May. Unity 25 will be "the last evaluation of the complete space system and astronaut experience before commercial flight service opens in late June," the company said. The first commercial flight, Galactic 01, will carry Italian Air Force passengers. The company's founder, Richard Branson, was aboard the latest space flight in July 2021.

Unity 25 promises to be the fifth flight to reach space, according to the American definition, which thus qualifies a flight exceeding 80 kilometers in altitude. In practice, the carrier plane embarks the spacecraft takes off from the Spaceport America base in the New Mexico desert. Dropped, the latter then exceeds the famous 80-kilometer altitude boundary. Finally, it remains a few minutes in weightlessness before descending by hovering and landing on the same runway.

Virgin Galactic's biggest competitor, Blue Origin, Jeff Bezos' company, has already boarded 32 people on its short suborbital flights. Since an accident in September 2022, however, the rocket has been grounded. Blue Origin did not give a date when it would resume flights.

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