



The eagle has landed: Virgin Galactic's *Eve* mother ship ferries the new *Enterprise* spaceship.

The Ride of Your Life

With a mother ship and a brand-new spaceship ready to roll, Virgin Galactic's venture to space takes a giant step toward reality.

BY ELAINE SRNKA

AS DARKNESS FELL OVER THE MOJAVE DESERT, A JUBILANT CROWD gathered on a tarmac where flashing lights, dramatic music, and a sprinkling of snow added to the anticipation and excitement. Emerging from the shadows, mother ship *Eve* slowly taxied down the runway and rolled to a stop, presenting to the world its first look at her precious cargo: Virgin Galactic's completed spaceship, set to be the first commercial manned spacecraft.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the eagle has landed," said the announcer, and with that, the realization that we had just witnessed an important moment in history set in.

JACK BROCKWAY

“It’s as close to being reduced to tears as I’ve been,” admitted Sir Richard Branson of his first glimpse of the finished spaceship.

California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was also awed at his role in the unveiling of the ship, which he and New Mexico governor

Bill Richardson christened VSS *Enterprise*. “Governors get to do all sorts of things,” he said, “but this is one of the coolest things I’ve ever done.”

Indeed, it is very cool – and another step toward the reality of space tourism.

8 STEPS TO SUBORBITAL SPACE

Ready to take off? Here’s how.

STEP 1 Contact your travel advisor.

As Virgin Galactic’s official sales channel in the Americas, Virtuoso’s specially trained Accredited Space Agents can book your seat on the spaceship.

STEP 2 Put down your deposit.

A flight will cost \$200,000 – consider it the price of a chance to make history. Deposits – and seat assignments – vary depending on your flight priority. “Founders” are the first 84 customers, and those paid-in-full seats are essentially sold out; “Pioneers” claim the next 400 seats, whose deposits range from \$100,000 to the full \$200,000; after those are “Voyagers,” who pay a ten percent deposit.

STEP 3 Bask in benefits and bragging rights.

Fewer than 500 people have ever gone into space to date, so you’ll be joining lofty ranks regardless of seat assignment. Once you’ve been confirmed, you’ll receive a welcome pack, gift, and insider updates, including invitations to events (such as the recent spaceship unveiling in December).

STEP 4 Be patient.

This is not a race, says Burt Rutan, founder of the aerospace company Scaled Composites, which Branson tapped to build Virgin Galactic’s mother ships and spaceships. Commercial flights will not commence until

rigorous safety checks and test flights (and, of course, U.S. regulatory approval) have been met. Such test flights are set to begin in the first quarter of this year, and if all goes well, commercial flights may begin by 2012.

STEP 5 Participate in preflight training.

Though there’s no age limit (the oldest customer is 84), passengers must undergo medical exams to assess their fitness to fly. At the three-day astronaut experience at Spaceport America in New Mexico, you’ll be issued a Philippe Starck-designed space suit, undergo g-force and possibly weightlessness training, and learn more about your mission.

STEP 6 Prepare for takeoff.

While friends and family await your return in the spaceport’s lounge, you’ll board the sleek spaceship with five fellow passengers and two pilots. Don’t worry – every seat has a window view. The spaceship is berthed to the *Eve* mother ship (named for Branson’s mother), a twin-boom jet airplane made of 100 percent carbon composite material. After takeoff you’ll fly to 50,000 feet and hear a countdown. When the spaceship releases and its hybrid rocket motor fires up, it will accelerate into a vertical climb; in ten seconds you’ll

reach Mach 1 (the speed of sound) and in 30 seconds you’ll be at Mach 3.4 – literally faster than a speeding bullet. After 90 seconds, the pilots will cut the motor and the spaceship will continue to climb to its peak altitude of 360,000 feet – 68 miles above Earth.

STEP 7 Enjoy the view.

Six miles above the space border, you’ll experience total silence – and zero g, floating weightlessly throughout the cabin for the next four to five minutes. Through the windows, look back at Earth and see our planet’s curvature meeting the total blackness of space. Astronauts report humbling awe and a sense of responsibility as they comprehend the frailty of the thin blue line that is our atmosphere and the magnitude of our universe.

STEP 8 Return to your seats – and an entirely new perspective.

Pointing back toward Earth, the spaceship embarks on a thrilling 90-second reentry, peaking at nearly 6 gs. The spaceship’s wings, which have been neatly “feathered” up throughout the flight, will rotate back to their usual position to glide you safely back to Earth to collect your astronaut wings. One thing is quite certain: You will exit that spacecraft a changed person. VI

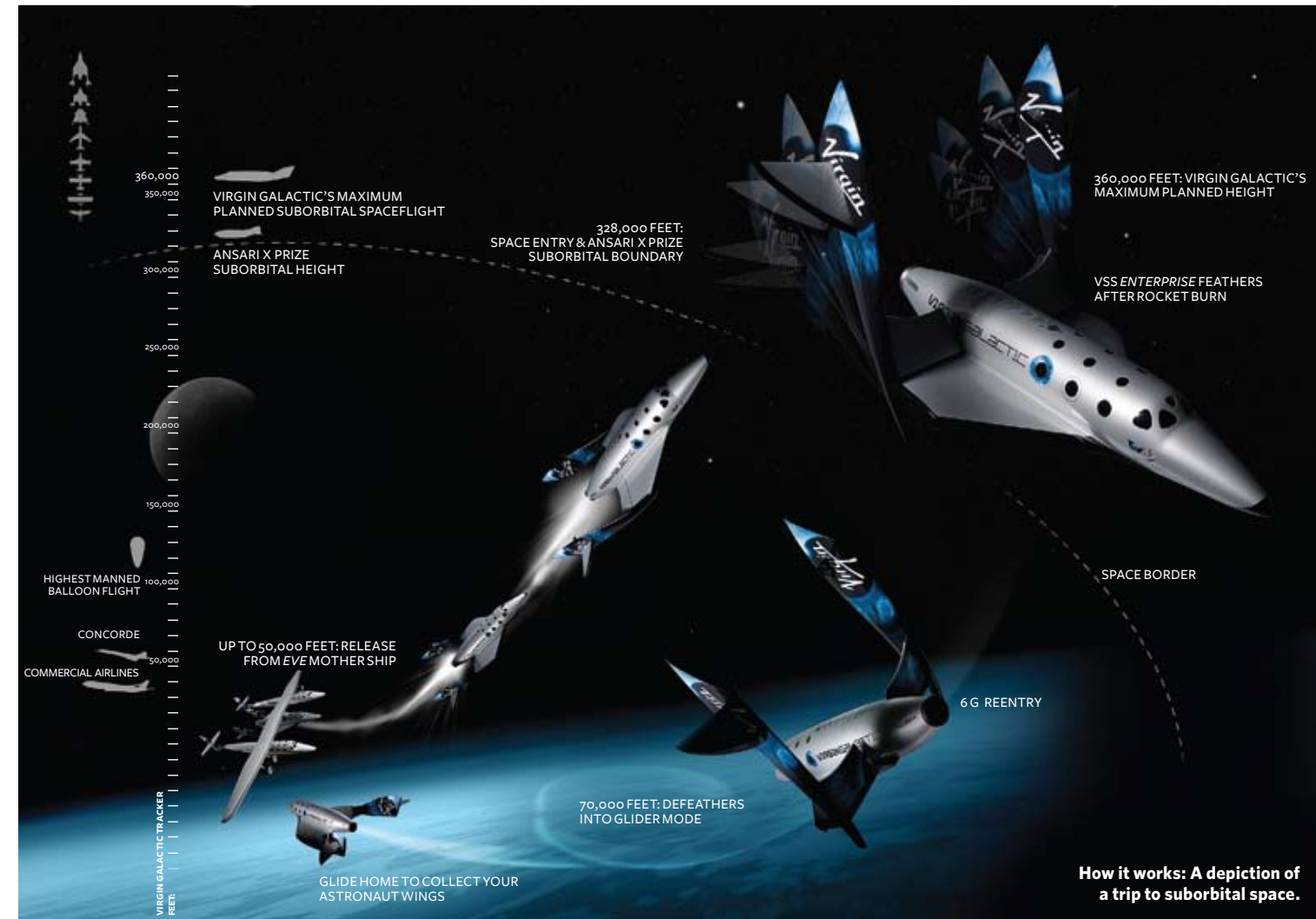


Mother, may I: VMS *Eve* (top) will escort the spaceship to 50,000 feet before releasing it into suborbital space.

Fewer than 500 people have ever gone into space, so you’ll be joining lofty ranks.



Flights will initially take off from Spaceport America, now under construction in New Mexico.



How it works: A depiction of a trip to suborbital space.



Test flights begin in the first quarter of this year.