# Company unveils world’s first commercial spaceship

**By Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor**

These are the voyages of the *VSS Enterprise*. To ferry civilians into space. To collect $200,000 a head. To boldly go where few space tourists have gone before!

On Monday, December 7th (an “infamous” date, to be sure), Virgin Galactic unveiled [1] SpaceShipTwo [2], the world’s first commercial spaceline. Dubbed the *VSS* (Virgin Space Ship) *Enterprise*, SpaceShipTwo is a suborbital composite spaceship, capable of ferrying two pilots and six passengers into the thermosphere (an apogee of about 110 km). The Enterprise features a wing span of 8.23 m (27 ft), a length of 18.29 m (60 ft), and top speed of 4,200 km/h (2,600 mph). It will launch at 15,200 m (50,000 ft) from its mother ship, White Knight Two [3].

Burt Rutan (President of Scaled Composites, a partner company) claims the Enterprise will be 100 times safer than government space travel—which, in recent years, has seen multiple [4] disasters [5] and near misses [6]. It uses a “feathered reentry system [7]” that results in low reentry speeds—a stark contrast with space shuttles, which reenter at orbital speeds (25,000 km/h or 16,000 mph), and require heat shields. According to Rutan [8], “This is designed to be at least as safe as the early airliners in the 1920s…don’t believe anyone that tells you that the safety will be the same as a modern airliner, which has been around for 70 years.”

SpaceShipTwo roll out.

Want to be the next space tourist? It’ll cost you a cool $200,000. By contrast, Russia charges [9] $51 million to ride a Soyuz spacecraft—of course, the Soyuz [10] is an

orbital spacecraft, while the SpaceShipTwo is suborbital. But for the would-be civvie space traveler, the difference is semantics, as few outside of NASA and its Russian counterpart have experienced anything remotely comparable. The *Enterprise* is the first of five suborbital spacecraft from Virgin Galactic, with a planned "Virgin" flight sometime in 2011. The company has deposits from 300 potential space travelers.

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