VIRGIN GALACTIC TO HURL ROCKETS TO SPACE FROM BOEING 747 JET

News / Airlines

Richard Branson is finding a new use for an old Virgin Atlantic jumbo jetliner: to fling rockets to orbit.

Virgin Galactic, the commercial space company founded by the billionaire, plans to send small rockets inflight from the **Boeing 747-400** nicknamed "Cosmic Girl" that it purchased from Branson's airline.

Branson is among the entrepreneurs vying to shake up the US$6 billion commercial launch business known for years-long waits to loft US$200 million satellites. Instead of firing large boosters from conventional pads, the new rocketeers are working to loft smaller craft from planes and remote locations in Texas or the South Pacific.

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"Air launch enables us to provide rapid, responsive service to our satellite customers on a schedule set by their business and operational needs, rather than the constraints of national launch ranges," George Whitesides, Virgin Galactic's chief executive officer, said in a statement Thursday.

The commercial jet replaces WhiteKnightTwo, a twin-hulled carrier vehicle that will still be used to hoist a suborbital tourist craft. Virgin's SpaceShipTwo venture has been grounded since a training accident killed a pilot last year. A second spaceship is slated to debut in February, with ground and flight tests resuming "soon after," said Michelle Mendiola, a Virgin spokeswoman.

Test Flights

Virgin expects to begin test flights of its LauncherOne rocket in 2017. It will be mounted under the 747's left wing, adjacent to a position used by other jumbos to ferry a fifth engine, the company said. The spacecraft's payload has been doubled to ferry 200-kilogram (440-pound) payloads to orbit for less than US$10 million.

Newcomers like Virgin Galactic have the potential to slash prices in a field attuned to government contracts and dominated by traditional aerospace powers like United Launch Alliance, a Boeing-Lockheed Martin Corp. venture, and Europe's Arianespace SA, according to Marco Caceres, director of space studies for Fairfax, Virginia-based consultant Teal Group.

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