



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on July 30, 2009

Abu Dhabi Backs Space Tourism

Aabar Investments of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates agreed on July 28 to buy a 32 percent stake in Sir Richard Branson's space tourism venture known as Virgin Galactic. The \$280 million deal was inked on the grounds of the Experimental Aircraft Association's annual AirVenture fly-in event held in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.



WhiteKnightTwo, the specially designed aircraft that will carry Virgin Galactic's spacecraft to high altitude and then launch it, had flown to the EAA convention and formed a suitable backdrop for the signing ceremony. The reusable vehicle it will ferry to the edge of space is known as SpaceShipTwo. Virgin Galactic hopes to begin testing SpaceShipTwo by the end of this year. The sub-orbital spacecraft can hold two crew members and six passengers; passengers will be able to leave their seats and experience zero gravity while enjoying views of Earth and space.

In return for investing more than a quarter of a billion dollars in Virgin Galactic, Abu Dhabi will gain "exclusive regional rights" to launch both tourism and research flights into space. According to a [July 28 story](#) by Associated Press, Aabar Investments "plans to pay an extra \$100 million plus transaction costs to fund a program to launch small satellites into orbit, and will build spaceport facilities in Abu Dhabi." Aabar Chairman Khadem al-Qubaisi stated: "The significant partnership not only falls in line with Abu Dhabi's larger plans to inculcate technology research and science at a grassroots level but also complements its aim to be the international tourism capital of the region."

While the deal has yet to be approved by regulators in the United States and elsewhere, AP notes that Virgin Galactic "has taken 300 reservations at \$200,000 each and is holding \$40 million in deposits." Virgin Galactic President Will Whitehorn said that scientist Stephen Hawking and *Superman Returns* director Bryan Singer are among those who seek to become spacefaring tourists. Once testing is complete, the first paid flights will likely be launched from the U.S. state of New Mexico.

If space tourism succeeds, it will be because private enterprise supplied the ingenuity and investment, not government. Reuters [reported on July 29](#) that a presidential panel has reached a similar conclusion on the value of private initiative to space exploration. A subcommittee of the Human Space Flight Review panel has come out in favor of giving private firms the chance to run transport services to the International Space Station. NASA would thereby be freed "to focus on new challenges, such as extending human presence beyond low-Earth orbit."

"Let's turn it over to newcomers," Bohdan "Bo" Bejmuk, a former Boeing Co. executive, told panel



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members during a meeting broadcast by NASA. "I think you will find out there are a lot of people who will rise and compete. Some of them will fail, some of them will succeed, but you will have essentially created a new industry." NASA has already given seed money to private companies Orbital Sciences Corp. and Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX) so that they can develop commercial spaceships capable of hauling cargo to the International Space Station.

If there is profit to be found at an acceptable level of risk, then America can be sure that space exploration will continue apace, not in the hands of government but of private enterprise. Now if only the president would apply the down-to-earth wisdom of his own space flight panel to the issue of healthcare reform by limiting government's role and letting the free market launch its own solutions.



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