CA Desert Spaceship Factory Completed

MOJAVE, California (AP) — Space tourism is closer to reality after the completion of an $8 million Mojave Desert production plant where the world's first fleet of passenger-ready spaceships will be built.

Hundreds of public officials and reporters were invited Monday to tour the giant hangar where the White Knight and SpaceShipTwo craft will be built. Up to 200 people will work at the assembly plant and it will be used primarily for the final assembly, integration and testing before the aircraft are delivered to customers.

The Spaceship Co. facility is a joint venture of Mojave-based Scaled Composites and British billionaire Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic.

"Today marks another important step along the road to opening space for everyone," Branson said. "From this hangar, the talented team at The Spaceship Co. will be at the forefront of making space access safe, reliable and affordable."

Virgin Galactic CEO George Whitesides told the Los Angeles Times that completion of the production facility moves Galactic closer to sending paying passengers into space. A ticket costs $200,000 and more than 400 people have paid the full price or a deposit for a chance to experience weightlessness, according to Virgin Galactic.

SpaceShipTwo is based on Burt Rutan's award-winning SpaceShipOne prototype, which became the first privately financed manned rocket to reach space in 2004.

A key test for SpaceShipTwo will come when engineers start powered flights into space, expected later this year. Until now, all the tests have been unpowered glide flights.

No date has been set for the first commercial flight, which is expected to launch from a custom-built spaceport in New Mexico.

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