

Virgin Galactic flights grounded pending investigation into 'mishap' during Branson space mission

Virgin Galactic has been banned from launching test flights into space while US safety regulators investigate a "mishap" that occurred during founder Sir Richard Branson's journey in July.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said Virgin Galactic's rocket plane, known as SpaceShipTwo, that [took the British billionaire and five of his employees to the edge of space](#) veered off course during its descent back to its runway in the New Mexico desert on 11 July.

The deviation put the spaceship outside the air traffic control clearance area.

"Virgin Galactic may not return the SpaceShipTwo vehicle to flight until the FAA approves the final mishap investigation report or determines the issues related to the mishap do not affect public safety," the FAA said in a statement.



Image:

The 11 July flight with Richard Branson on board did drop below the altitude of the airspace for a short distance and time, the company said

[Virgin Galactic](#) has insisted that Sir Richard and everyone else on board were never in any added danger.

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The company acknowledged in a statement that “the flight’s ultimate trajectory deviated from our initial plan” but added it “did not fly outside of the lateral confines of the protected airspace”.

It said the flight did drop below the altitude of the airspace for a short distance and time – one minute and 41 seconds – before re-entering restricted airspace.

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It added that “at no time did the ship travel above any population centres or cause a hazard to the public”.

The company said it was “working in partnership with the FAA to address the airspace for future flights”.

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Richard Branson returns from the edge of space

Sir Richard touted the 11 July mission as a precursor to a new era of space tourism and hailed it as an “experience of a lifetime”.

He became the first owner-astronaut to take part in a mission, leading a series of space breakthroughs this year, with Amazon founder Jeff Bezos also blasting off in July, while Elon Musk continues work on his SpaceX company.