

# Skyrora, launching vertical commercial rockets into orbit from the UK

*As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Volodymyr Levykin, CEO and Founder of Skyrora about "rocket science", the need for commercial rockets, spacejunk and the appeal of Scotland for business and life.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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Having been born and raised in Ukraine, not too far from Dnipro - which is known as 'Rocket City' - space has always piqued my interest. I studied computer science before moving to the UK where I worked in software engineering. After this I was the CTO of an IT services business and then an MD of an AIM-listed e-commerce business. When I sold my stake I ran another IT business, but this time in Silicon Valley.

I knew when I came back to Europe over 15 years ago that I wanted to live in Scotland again. It's in pole position to lead the UK's space efforts due to its geography and being home to all three of the UK's proposed vertical launch spaceports.

## Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Skyrora is a Scotland-based rocket company that is on course to become the first to launch a vertical commercial rocket into orbit from UK soil. We

design, build and launch rockets for the small-satellite manufacturers looking to access space. We're developing domestic space sector expertise and infrastructure, which will not only benefit customers internationally but is also crucial to establishing sovereign launch capabilities. In an industry worth £16.4B each year, it is vital we continue to develop a thriving space sector as a key generator of jobs and economic output.

We work with a number of key players in the space industry, from governmental and supranational agencies like the UK Space Agency (UKSA) and European Space Agency (ESA) to companies such as Spirit Aerosystems, Viasat and CGI.

## How has the business evolved since its launch?

I founded Skyrora in 2017, and since then the business has grown incredibly to over 150 people across multiple sites. We've localised our supply chains by opening new rocket engine testing and manufacturing facilities in Midlothian and Cumbernauld, Scotland, respectively - both the largest in the UK in 2022. We also built Skyprint 2, the largest hybrid 3D printer of its kind in Europe, which we've used to 3D print many components of our rockets, including our updated 70kN engine. In addition to company milestones, there have been national ones too; we completed the UK's first static fire rocket test in over half a century since the Black Arrow Programme.

We've also launched a rocket! Our suborbital Skylark L rocket left the launch pad at a site in Langanes, Iceland, and the lessons learnt from this first test launch from our mobile spaceport have proved invaluable for our next launch.

# Tell us about the working culture at Skyrora

What we're doing is quite literally rocket science so we've cultivated an international team of highly skilled people to help us achieve our ambitious aims. The team has over 200 years of combined rocketry expertise from programmes including Zenit, Sea Launch, and Antares. However, it's important to me that we create an environment in which people feel comfortable to share ideas, and where we can celebrate our wins but aren't ashamed of our mistakes either.

## How are you funded?

Skyrora is both privately funded and a recipient of grants from the UKSA and the ESA.

## What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Launching a rocket during what a local described as the "storm of the decade". The extreme weather conditions we experienced in Iceland were like none we'd ever seen before but launching (and getting permission from the Icelandic Government to do so) required resilience and tenacity. Our team really showed their grit and determination as they worked hard to build everything - including a road to the launch site. This was part of the long-game as they also spent a few years engaging with local authorities to build the Iceland-UK space bridge to make this possible in the first place.

## How does Skyrora answer an unmet need?

As a small launch provider, we're all about flexibility and accessibility; we provide a tailored "taxi"-like service for satellites, taking them exactly

where they need to go. This means we can support the huge demand for smaller payload services, who have told us of a need for last minute payload integration and quick lead times to launch.

Skyrora has also developed a mobile spaceport solution - this launch pad can be set up and taken down quickly and easily transported. Due to the spaceport's mobility, we can minimise the footprint of launch operations on the surrounding landscape and wildlife habitats, leaving little to no trace of activity behind. Space junk is also a real issue as our low Earth orbit is littered with unused or broken satellites, however, a project we're working on, the Space Tug, will one day help to remove the debris.

## What's in store for the future?

Forgive the pun but the only way is up. Everything we're currently doing is taking us one step closer to orbital launch.

## What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Try to keep costs low. This doesn't mean cutting corners or not hiring a skilled team or not paying them well! Some industries, like spacetechnology, are naturally capital intensive but understanding how to extend your funding runway is crucial. Whether that's having a localised supply chain to minimise costs or automating certain tasks, it's important to know how to not overspend. This will also benefit you if you're looking for investment from angels or venture capitalists or applying for grants as it shows you can make money last and won't burn through cash.

## And finally, a more personal question! What's

# your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

When I'm not working, I try to spend as much time in nature as possible. Being surrounded by Scotland's spectacular views and landscapes is a great way to spend time with my family and also alleviate stress.

Volodymyr Levykin, CEO and Founder of *Skyrora*.

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