

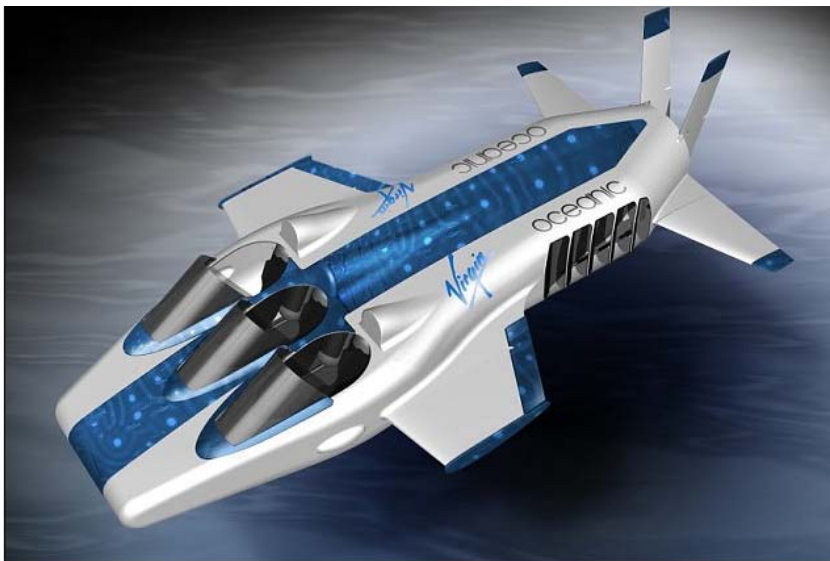
What to get the man who has everything? An underwater plane of course

By CLAIRE BATES
Last updated at 2:43 PM on 29th January 2010

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Billionaire Sir Richard Branson may already own an airline, a record label, a mobile phone company, several luxury restaurants and a Caribbean island. But today the entrepreneur unveiled his latest toy - an underwater plane.

The £415,000 prototype submersible is called the Necker Nymph and can dive to depths of up to 130ft. Sir Richard hopes to one day explore depths of 35,000ft - which is far more than the height of Mount Everest.



The Virgin Necker Nymph will dive up to 130ft under the waves. It is made from carbon fibre and has fighter jet technology

Sir Richard plans to lend it out to visitors of his luxury hideaway, Necker Island. Gliding like an aeroplane through the water it can carry a pilot and two visitors on a two-hour trip.

After undergoing scuba training, guests can uncover ancient shipwrecks, fly side-by-side with dolphins or follow whales.

The carbon fibre Nymph can also dive to depths of up to 35,000ft - which is far more than the height of Mount Everest.

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Such a unique experience comes at a price of course. The Nymph is available to hire for \$25,000 a week (£15,000), but only after you have forked out a minimum of \$88,000 (£55,000) for seven nights on the luxury catamaran, the Necker Belle.

The luxury sub has fighter jet technology and is piloted with a joystick. While most subs use ballast to propel subs under the water, the Nymph uses downward 'lift' on the wings to fly down.



Virgin Atlantic boss Sir Richard Branson poses with model Kate Moss to celebrate the airline's 25th Birthday. His latest acquisition is the £415,000 underwater plane

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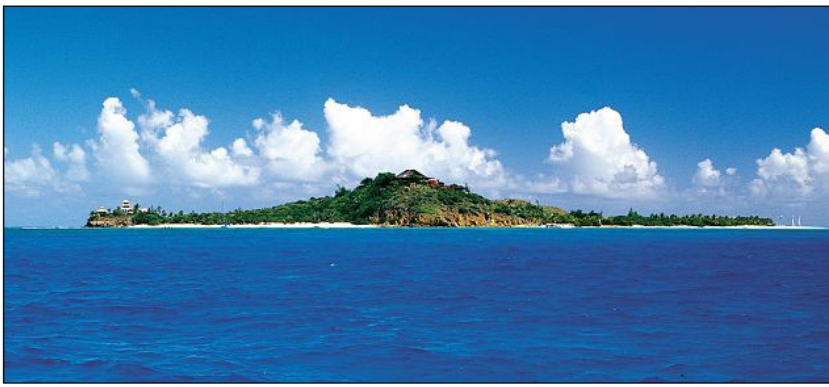


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Getaway: Necker Island in the Caribbean was bought by Sir Richard Branson when he was just 28. The new submarine can be hired by guests staying there

It was designed and built by Graham Hawkes, chief of Hawkes Ocean Technologies.

Marketing manager Karen Hawkes, said: 'It has the flexibility to glide peacefully over glorious reefs or bank adventurously in 360 degree turns.'

She described the sub, which is part of its Deep Flight range, as 'hydrobotic' with individual 'wind shields' that removes the pressure of slipstream. This means the sub can have an open cockpit that gives guests panoramic views.

Ms Hawkes also insisted that the sub had a low environmental impact.

'Its positive buoyancy prevents the sub from landing on a reef, and its low light and noise emissions ensure the fragile ocean ecosystems remain undisturbed.'

Sir Richard is expecting the sub to be delivered on February 20. So those readers who have a spare £70,000 may jump at this adventurous week's holiday. The rest of us can just dream...



Necker Island resides in the British Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. It has features such as Orchid Valley and Honeymoon Cove

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