

'Iron Man' pilots race in jet suits against a backdrop of Dubai skyscrapers

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Jet suit pilots race in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Dubai on Wednesday hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Gambrell

Pilots lined up on a runway in Dubai on Wednesday and fired up their seven jet engines with an ear-splitting roar. But they weren't preparing to fly an airplane—they were the aircraft.

This city-state in the United Arab Emirates, known for being home to the world's tallest building and other wonders, hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the [jet engines](#) on their hands and their backs.

And if it sounds like Iron Man, the Marvel comic book character made internationally known by actor Robert Downey Jr., the pilots say it is exactly like that.

"The closest analogy would be that dream of flying ... and then go wherever your mind is taking you," said Richard Browning, the founder and chief test [pilot](#) for Gravity Industries, the firm that put on the race with Dubai. "And yes, the world of Marvel superheroes and DC Comics, they have created that dream book with CGI, and we've got the closest I think anybody's ever got to delivering that for real."

Gravity previously drew worldwide attention when it equipped one of its jet suits on [a U.K. Royal Marine](#), who landed on a ship at sea several years ago. In the time since, they've traveled widely with the suits and pursued other [military applications](#) for them before coming up with the idea of a competition with the Dubai Sports Council.



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The races on Wednesday saw pilots wear 1,500-horsepower jet suits, more powerful than most luxury sports cars and using the same kind of fuel used by Dubai-based long-haul carrier Emirates' Airbus A380s and Boeing 777 aircraft. Pilots lined up on a runway used at the Dubai Marina by Skydive Dubai, the thrill-seeking firm associated with the sheikhdom's Crown Prince Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, with some parachutists coming down as they prepared their jet packs.

Then came what pilot Issa Kalfon referred to as "the moment of truth." The engines roared and pilots jumped and leaned forward. And like a helicopter takes off, so too did the pilots as they sped around obstacles in a water channel near the site. Organizers said they picked the water site to allow for higher speeds and for safety as the pilots skimmed a short distance above the water.

The jet suit currently can reach speeds of 80 mph (128 kph), Gravity says. The pilots did pick up speed during their heats, with two actually bumping into each other but remaining in the air as a crowd watched in wonder.



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"It's pretty amazing to see that they can do this in Dubai and they have these guys flying over the water," said Jennifer Ross, 50, a U.S. citizen from Houston who now lives in Dubai. "It's kind of like astronauts flying around in space."

While known for its beaches, bars and bazaars, Dubai has long been a city fascinated by flight, particularly as it hosts the world's busiest airport for international travel. The city has been pursuing for years the idea of flying taxis as well.

Dubai also has grown into an adventure capital as well. XDubai, which also is associated with Sheikh Hamdan, has run zip line attractions over Dubai Marina and its downtown by the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

There are risks, however. In 2020, Vincent Reffet, one of Dubai's original "Jetmen" as part of a separate venture, died in a crash during training after gaining fame for once flying alongside an Emirates double-decker A380.



Richard Browning of Gravity Industries races one of his firm's jet suits in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Dubai on Wednesday hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Gambrell



A jet suit pilot lands in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Dubai on Wednesday hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Gambrell



Jet suit pilots land after a race in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Dubai on Wednesday hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Gambrell



Emirati jet suit pilot Ahmed al-Shehhi crashes into the water during a race in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Dubai on Wednesday hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Gambrell



Richard Browning of Gravity Industries prepares to race one of his firm's jet suits in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Dubai on Wednesday hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Gambrell



Jet suit pilot Issa Kalfon of the United Kingdom, center, waves his trophy after winning a race in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2024. Dubai on Wednesday hosted what it called its first-ever jet suit race. Racers zipped along a route with the skyscrapers of Dubai Marina looming behind them, controlling the jet engines on their hands and their backs. Credit: AP Photo/Jon Gambrell



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Kalfon, who ended up winning the race and hoisting a golden jet turbine, acknowledged getting nervous before his flights, but described the jet suit as safe and easy to handle.

"Everything's hot, it's running, the engines are screaming at you," Kalfon said. "And the flag drops, and it's just—you absolutely go for it."

There was one crash during Wednesday's race. Emirati pilot Ahmed al-

Shehhi smashed into the water during his heat, going feet first but immediately popping back up to give a thumbs-up to rescuers. An announcer described him as having just 12 days of training before the race. The smell of jet fuel came off his unit as technicians carried off a boat afterward.

Meanwhile, onlookers gaped at the jet suits, with several saying they couldn't wait to go for a ride themselves.

"You can see the best show you can ever see in Dubai because people are flying—they are flying in the sky," said Pratik Vyas, 35, of Gujarat, India, who works in an import-export business. "It's a next-level tech. It's really, really nice because if you're a big fan of Iron Man, you know, Tony Stark, it's Iron Man tech."

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