

Astronauts forgo Earthly pleasures on fake Mars mission

By QMI AGENCY

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Mars 500 crewmember Romain Charles takes part in an experiment on a simulated voyage to Mars.

The human race will not hold its collective breath when Mars mission explorer Romain Charles soon steps foot from the isolation of his experimental pod and enters a strange and distant landscape.

Come Valentine's Day, when the hatch opens, a small group of journalists and a battalion of eager scientists will view the first steps.

The rest of the world may well be oblivious to an important milestone in space exploration.

Because while Charles and five other crew members are primed to create history, they're actually only going through the motions.

Charles is part of a marathon endurance European Space Agency experiment dubbed Mars 500 — a mock mission to the Red Planet.

He and his team have been cooped up in a system of tube-like structures in the outskirts of Moscow for the past eight months.

As part of a series of experiments proposed by the Canadian Space Agency, they will look at things like fatigue and mental fitness.

They're also eating space food, living without sunlight, running through mock emergencies and experiencing the delay in communications astronauts would experience on a real outing to Mars.

"A good reason for optimism is that we never had any conflict within the crew," the 31-year-old engineer told QMI Agency from inside his earthbound spacecraft.

But they aren't feeling the same pressures as astronauts would on a real mission to Mars.

"I know that I can leave the modules at any time if I want to," Charles acknowledged. "The risks are quite low for me."

Now having — on the book — landed on the planet, they will step outside on simulated alien turf. It's essentially a dirt lot, but to the spacesuit-clad mission members, it's as close as they can come to the real thing.

Their footprints only mark the halfway point in the mission, as they will remain in their large hamster-cage world until November.

If not the weight of our world, the men still carry the burden of their experiments and constant monotony.

There are women on board.

"Overall, I'm coping better than I imagined," wrote Charles in an e-mail dispatch.

The first real trip to Mars is planned for between 2030 and 2035, at the earliest.

"Space beyond low earth orbit is our new frontier and I'm convinced that we will see men going there in the next decades," said Charles.

And the things Charles misses the most?

"I dream about a good cheese with crusty bread," he said, "and an old and tasty red wine."