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Mars500 laboratories 'take crew into space without leaving the ground'

A network of laboratories in the Moscow Institute for Biomedical Problems has been home to six virtual astronauts for 243 days.

The team - including one Chinese member, two Europeans and three Russians - are part of the Mars500 project.

For a total of 520 days, they are remaining sealed inside the laboratories to simulate the process of flying a manned mission to Mars and returning to Earth.

However, when they leave their module tomorrow (February 12th) it will not be the Mars surface they step out on to.

Instead, a large hall adjacent to the modules has been converted to simulate an area of the planet's crust.

Commander Alexandr Smoleevskiy and his European colleague Diego Urbino will walk through the hall, dressed in space suits as they would if they were really on Mars.

Meanwhile, the Russian ISS control centre's scientists will look on, along with media representatives and an audience of invited guests.