

TheNational^{BETA}

Mission Mars lite

National Editorial

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For eight months, the spaceship hurtled towards Mars and, on February 2, it finally entered orbit. Tomorrow three of the ship's six astronauts - three Russians, an Italian, a Frenchman and a Chinese - will make their way out of the ship and onto the rock-strewn surface of the red planet. While this is clearly a make-believe venture, it certainly is no science fiction. Mars500, an experiment by the European Space Agency (ESA), was designed to simulate a Mars expedition and explore how humans would cope with the stress and isolation that astronauts would face on real missions to the outer reaches of the solar system.

Popular culture's take on Mars has ranged from the ridiculousness of pointy-eared green martians to movies like Mission to Mars and The Red Planet, which take themselves marginally more seriously. But this is the first time that a scientific initiative has been undertaken in an effort to understand the limits of human endurance in such a situation.

While scientists could not mimic weightlessness effectively, the three astronauts will spend 30 days in a simulation environment before returning to their capsule. In total, the mission will last the 520 days that a trip to Mars and back would require.

Serious research into a mission to Mars is a step forward, but building a ship and blasting off is still decades away. And that's assuming these astronauts don't turn into green monsters in the meantime.