

Six-man crew completes one year on virtual Mars mission

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Six men on a virtual return voyage to Mars have celebrated a year in isolation. The Mars 500 project is designed to see if future space explorers can withstand the psychological pressures of a mission to the Red Planet that could last many months. Having "landed" on a mock Martian surface, they are now heading back to Earth in their "spaceship".

The craft, sited near Moscow, has four sealed interconnected cylinders. The Russian, French, Italian and Chinese crew have their own private cabins, but work together like astronauts on the International Space Station.

In a letter home, French engineer Romain Charles, 31, wrote: "The dark side of this routine is that every day for the past year, we woke up at the same time to do the same medical controls with the same devices: no weekend or holiday breaks for a year!"

The crew, whose mission started on 3 June last year, "landed" on Mars at the end of January and are due "home" on 5 November.

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