

Mock Mars flight breaks record



Mock flight ... astronaut tries on 'space suit' during mission

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SIX cosmonauts have broken the record for the longest mission ever enclosed in a metal spacecraft - despite their vessel never leaving Moscow.

The Mars500 crew have so far endured 438 days of isolation as part of a simulated mission to Mars.

They have survived on a diet of cereal bars and pasta and have had little contact with friends and family back home.

Throughout the 14 months since "takeoff" the steel vessel remained grounded at Moscow's Institute of Biomedical Problems.

The craft though simulates the conditions of a real-life mission to the red planet so that scientists can explore the psychological and physical impact of long-distance space flight.

The mission's Martian "landing" back in February was staged in an adjoining room resembling a large sandpit.

Russian cosmonaut Valeri Polyakov -- the actual holder of the space endurance record, who spent 437 days orbiting Earth aboard the Mir space station in 1995 -- congratulated the Mars500 crew.

Video: Life as a Mars500 astronaut

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He described their experience as "identical as spaceflight, except no weightlessness," and told the crew: "Better now not to count how much time has passed but how much remains. It has a positive effect." For the past 438 days, the crew worked inside a closed, windowless space of 19,400 cubic feet (550 cubic meters), observed by doctors and psychologists.



Record breakers ... crew of the Mars 500 mission

IBMP/Oleg Voloshin

They clean themselves in a heat chamber similar to a sauna and have to eat their meals, which they retrieve through a hatch, in their entirety, as scientists are studying the reaction of their bodies to a long-term space diet.

The crew plays computer games simulating emergencies on Mars, as well as "Guitar Hero," and the European Space Agency provides them with surprise gifts, such as books and T-shirts, to sustain morale during the long "trip" back.

Only three of the crew -- Russian Aleksandr Smoleevskiy, Italian Diego Urbina and a Chinese trainee cosmonaut, Wang Yue -- actually left the craft for the simulated Mars landing. Romain Charles, a French engineer, and two Russians, surgeon Sukhrob Kamolov and shipbuilding engineer Aleksii Sitev, remained inside the vessel throughout.

If they last the full 520 days, each member of the expedition will receive a fee of three million rubles (\$103,704), apart from Wang, who is rumoured to be receiving less.