

Mars 500 crew share thoughts on their mission

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An all-male international crew of six has emerged from 520 days of confinement on a mock mission to Mars. They have hugged their families and been greeted by Moscow's first snow of winter. Here, Alexey Sitev and his crew tell *New Scientist* about life inside, how the experience has affected their feelings for one another – and what they thought about the food.

What helped you get through the 520 days?

Romain Charles (RC), flight engineer: For me it was mainly writing to my family and my friends that gave me my serene mood

Sukhrob Kamolov (SK), crew physician: The interesting scientific research in medicine and biology, which was my speciality since I'm a doctor. Of course, also the support of my family, and self-discipline

Diego Urbina (DU), researcher: Communication with the outside was positive, also exercise gave you a good mood. Finally, the public relations activities were good: you get feedback from all the kids that want to go to Mars, and they tell you so many nice things, so many things about their own dreams – that gives you the impulse to go on

Wang Yue (WY), researcher: First, support from the workers, doctors, engineers and others involved with the Mars 500 project. And second from ourselves: we trust each other, we help each other, and we make fun of each other. Also I tried some Chinese traditions like calligraphy, I watched some [TV] series, read some books, and I learned to play guitar with Romain

Alexandr Smoleevskiy (ASm), researcher: Of course, the most effective way to deal with stress was already learned during my prior service in the army. After the experience gained there, one can participate in practically any experiment

What was the hardest part of the trip?

Alexey Sitev (ASi), crew commander: The beginning of the experiment, because we had to get organised. Then the work just flowed

SK: The first few months, adapting to this closed module. You understand that you've been cut off, you will see only these people for 520 days. You have to adapt to not seeing the sun, not seeing grass, to having the same wood-panelled walls surrounding you. That was the hard part. I think in space it is easier – there's a window, you can see the stars

Cooped up together for 520 days, did you have any conflicts?

ASi: Not serious ones, no. The crew was well chosen. Any arguments were about professional activities, how best to do something. We were each experienced; we had our opinions, so we



The crew back on terra firma (Image:ESA/IBMP/O. Voloshin)

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could have disagreements. But these were work-related

SK: If any people live together there will be conflicts, small things. If we felt a conflict brewing we tried to step back, to reduce and resolve the irritation

RC: We never had conflicts, but we had some moments where we didn't agree – sometimes due to our backgrounds and cultural differences. For example, for me, the meal is a moment where we talk with my family, we share our day. I like to do that, it's important. For some of the other crew members, their background is that during lunch, you eat in silence. Only during the tea at the end of the lunch do you talk together. We ended up not understanding each other... but we overcame it quite quickly

How did you resolve that conflict?

RC: We asked questions and talked about it... Then it depended on the day. We could feel – because we were in the end very close to each other – we could feel if someone was in a better mood, able to joke around while he is eating, or no, not today. The compromise was there and it went pretty well

So how did you like the food?

(During the first half of the experiment, on the way to Mars, the crew ate re-heatable food, like pre-packaged airplane meals. For the "return" mission they ate powdered, just-add-water food)

WY: It was our first topic of conversation – the permanent topic, in fact. Food! I couldn't eat the food! It's not noodles, it's potatoes. Potatoes, potatoes. Fried potatoes: European style. From the beginning, I said I don't want to eat potatoes. But after maybe 300 days, as we began to return to Earth, and we had to eat the powders mixed with cold water instead, I said: "I want potatoes!"

ASi: It was good

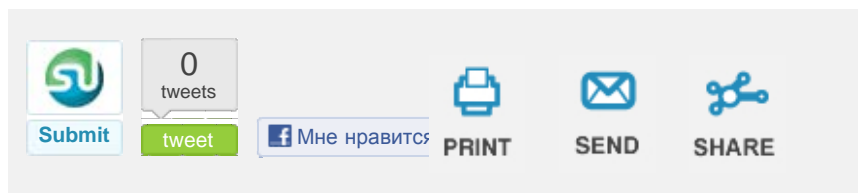
RC: We had some powdered wine for special occasions. And as a Frenchman, I'm sorry to say; it was just not wine

Will you miss each other?

ASi: [Laughing] Not yet!

RC: We still have to work together for a month, but I think we'll keep in touch

WY: We're still with each other! But of course we have email



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