

Mars500 crew shed light on 'Mars mission'

The international crew spent 520 days in a sealed capsule to see if man could survive the journey to Mars.

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The six crew - three Russians, two Europeans and one Chinese - appeared at their first news conference since being freed from the module in a Moscow hangar on November 4.

The \$15 million (£9.3 million) Mars500 experiment aimed to answer one of the big unknowns of deep-space travel: whether people could stay healthy and sane during 520 days rocketing to and back from the Red Planet.

The crew never blasted off into weightlessness, but scientists strived for their isolation to mimic the mental and physical strain of a real flight to Mars.

French crew member Romain Charles said that he thought the mission was a success.

"We can go forward in our plan to go to Mars and move confidently - humans can go there," he said.

Organisers tried to make the experiment as authentic as possible, simulating fake emergencies and space walks. The crew were kept busy conducting scientific experiments and were allowed to communicate with their loved ones via email, albeit with a delay to simulate deep space.

Mr Charles described how he coped with being confined in a small space for so long.

"We had a lot of different possibilities. We had some experiments which were going, that we had during the whole mission, to cope better. We had some personal choices, some of us would read and for me it was mainly writing to my family and my friends, it was giving me a lot of serene mood, getting their feedback and giving them my feedback," he said.

Russian crew member Rustamovich Sukhrob described what he felt about the mission.

"Probably (the most important thing) was our international group, six

people - all different nationalities, all from different countries, even in terms of character we were all very different people - we did this, we lived through 520 days together, we should we could live in peace and agreement , even in such a small space, that was also very important to me," he said.

The team ate rations like those of real astronauts, rarely showered, took blood and urine samples and slept plastered with electrodes all the while under constant video surveillance - a touch that earned the study comparisons to a reality TV show.

Mars500 was a significant improvement on a previous 420-day experiment in 2000 which ended in disaster when two participants got into a fistfight and a third tried to forcibly kiss a female crew member.

"As a team member, as a member of our crew team, the most surprising for me is we really successfully finished this long-term experiment. Everyone knows it was really not easy and we did it as a team and we trust each other," said Chinese crew member Wang Yue.

"Personally, well, I think the best thing for me is the crew members beside me. We are very good friends, even family members now, and we built the close and solid friendship now. I am very, very happy about this," he added.

Mars500, the first fully-fledged simulation, is being hailed as a success and has brought a welcome flood of publicity for the European Space Agency, struggling against waning interest in space exploration among crisis-hit tax payers.

Crew members were paid three million roubles (£61,500) each for the duration of the 'mission'.