

# The boomerangers' orbit

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I wish I were more fluent in Russian. If I were, I would be reading the firsthand accounts of the six volunteer astronauts who endured 520 days of isolation from the rest of the world as part of the Mars500 experiment conducted at the Russian Institute of Biomedical Problems in Moscow in cooperation with the European Space Agency.

For almost 18 months, the astronauts stayed in a 2,150-square-foot capsule that simulated conditions for a manned mission to Mars. The crew included engineers, physiologists and astronauts from Russia, China, France and Italy, and upon their release from their cramped quarters, they were all in good health and were able to report that while there had been a few tense moments, no one had tried to kill or maim any of their crewmates. If I could read Russian and Chinese and do more than order dinner with my high school French and travel-acquired Italian, I would love to know how that earthbound space crew did it.

My mind cannot function in terms of square footage. I can barely measure for curtains properly. My linear-thinking husband can, fortunately, and reports our house is 2,360 square feet, which is 210 square feet, or about the size of a one car garage, larger than the Mars500 facility. In our home facility, we house seven people, two dogs and now seven cats since we became part of the upward trend of Boomerangers. Boomerangers are adult children who return to live with their parents, usually out of economic necessity, often accompanied by spouses or children -- or cats, as is the case at our house. Our household is even further a multigenerational one since a few years ago, when we built a suite onto our home and welcomed my mother into the mix. I'm pretty sure she didn't know what all was on the horizon when she hitched her wagon to our star, but we are all on this ride together now.

At least my crew all speak the same language, for the most part, anyway. Sometimes I don't have a clue what they are talking and laughing about, but I'm sure it is something I have done. That helps when conflicts arise over who ate the last of the cookies, who has been hogging the bathroom and who has erased shows from whose DVR list. For our part as parents, it is sometimes as delicate to balance as an untethered spacewalk to find our footing. It is hard to see past our memories of the kids as tempestuous toddlers to imagine that they are adults making responsible, mature choices. More often than not, despite our pesky parental hovering, it has been gratifying to find that they are acting conscientiously, although the one daughter's stowaway cat commits acts that baffle any planet's logic.

The Mars500 research was carried out with a budget of \$15 million and was slated for just the 500 or so days. Perhaps that helped the crew find their way to compatibility. Our Bommeranger experiment does not have a set finish date and operates on much, much, much (I can't emphasize enough how very much) leaner funding. Still, we are finding our way, living more simply and creatively than we imagined achievable. It might just be that space or empty nest syndrome just isn't our final frontier.

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