

Three astronauts land on Earth from ISS in Russian capsule

April 27 2012



International Space Station (ISS) members, (from left) US astronaut Dan Burbank, Russian cosmonaut Anton Shkaplerov and Anatoly Ivanishin pose on November 12, 2011 behind a glass wall after their press conference at the Baikonur cosmodrome. The three have landed safely in the Kazakh steppe aboard a Russian Soyuz capsule after a stay of almost six months aboard the International Space Station.

Two Russian spacemen and a NASA astronaut touched down safely Friday in the Kazakh steppe aboard a Soyuz capsule after a stay of almost six months aboard the International Space Station.

Seventeen Russian helicopters and jets patrolled the clear blue skies as the silver metal capsule parachuted gracefully through the air before bumping into a field of straw and early spring grass and rolling over gently onto its side.

Live NASA TV footage showed a team of medics swarm the capsule and pull out a smiling Anton Shkaplerov -- a Russian awarded the honour of breathing the fresh air first because he occupied the capsule's middle seat.

Shkaplerov appeared "in good shape and none the worse for wear," a NASA commentator said as the spaceman gave a thumbs-up sign from inside his bulky white suit.

The three men were soon whisked away for a quick change of clothing and to pull on some special socks designed to improve their circulation and reduce the potential threat of blood clots and strokes.

It was the last touchdown performed by the older analogue version of the Soyuz capsule before it is replaced by a digital version.

Shkaplerov and his Russian counterpart Anatoly Ivanishin and American Dan Burbank will be replaced by a new crew that is due to take off from Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on May 15.

They will be joining Oleg Kononenko of Russia and Andre Kuipers of The Netherlands as well as NASA's Don Pettit on a mission that is also expected to last about six months.

The returning crew spent a few harrowing moments last month when they had to scramble inside the same Soyuz space craft and prepare for a possible forced evacuation because of incoming space debris.

The incident was just the third of its kind in more than a decade of continuous habitation of the Russian-launched ISS -- an orbiter that spins around Earth at an altitude of about 350 kilometres (220 miles).

The space junk ended up whizzing within 23 kilometres (14 miles) of

the webbed station at a speed that would have made direct impact potentially catastrophic.

The team's return was also delayed by 42 days after one of the Soyuz capsules was found to have a leak in its hermetic seal.

Russia's once-proud space programme has been beset by problems in the past year that have seen rockets fail to reach orbit and space exploration missions go awry.

The problems are a particular worry for NASA, which retired its space shuttle programme last year. The Soyuz now provides the world's only manned link to the ISS.

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Citation: Three astronauts land on Earth from ISS in Russian capsule (2012, April 27) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-04-astronauts-earth-iss-russian-capsule.html>

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