

Three-man Soyuz crew departs for space station

May 15 2012, By PETER LEONARD , Associated Press



In a photo provided by NASA the Soyuz TMA-04M rocket launches from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on Tuesday, May 15, 2012 carrying Expedition 31 Soyuz Commander Gennady Padalka, NASA Flight Engineer Joseph Acaba and Flight Engineer Sergei Revin to the International Space Station. (AP Photo/NASA, Bill Ingalls)

(AP) -- A three-man crew blasted off from a space center in southern Kazakhstan Tuesday morning on board a Russian-made Soyuz craft for a four-and-half-month stay at the International Space Station.

NASA astronaut Joseph Acaba and Russian cosmonauts [Gennady](#)

[Padalka](#) and Sergei Revin set off from the Baikonur facility as scheduled at 9:01 a.m. local time (0301 GMT).

Russia's space agency says the craft is due to dock with the [space station](#) Thursday morning Moscow time and will join the three astronauts currently staying at the orbiting laboratory.

The crew, which is being commanded by retired 53-year old Russian Air Force Col. Padalka, will immediately get to work preparing for the arrival next week of privately owned SpaceX's Dragon Capsule. It will be the first time a private company has launched space station supplies.

The space station is currently occupied by [Russian cosmonaut](#) Oleg Kononenko, NASA astronaut Don Pettit and Holland's [Andre Kuipers](#).

Padalka is a seasoned space traveler, having spent a total of 585 days in space on three previous missions on board the now-defunct Mir station and the current [International Space Station](#). Inglewood, California-native Acaba, who turns 45 on Thursday, on the day that Soyuz is due to dock, makes his second venture into space after his maiden orbital voyage on the shuttle in 2009. Revin, 46, is making his first trip to space.

Until NASA either brings a new craft online or private companies are able to arrange manned trips to the orbiting station, the Soviet-designed [Soyuz spacecraft](#) will remain the only means to deliver crews to the orbiting outpost.

The Russian space program has been blighted by a string of technical glitches in the recent past, raising questions over its dependability.

Tuesday's launch had been pushed back by two months due to depressurization of the spacecraft's descent module during the ground testing phase. It was the second significant postponement of a manned

Russian launch in the space of a year.

A Russian Mars moon probe crashed to Earth in January in what the nation's space agency described as the result of cosmic radiation.

That came only weeks after the crash of a communications satellite and the crash in August of a supply ship destined for the space station.

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Citation: Three-man Soyuz crew departs for space station (2012, May 15) retrieved 20 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-05-three-man-soyuz-crew-departs-space.html>

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