

# Woman takes command of ISS after crew return

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File photo of US astronaut Sunita Williams, who has become the second woman ever to take command of the International Space Station after three US and Russian colleagues left the orbiting space lab and landed safely in the Kazakh steppe

A woman took command of the International Space Station for only the second time Monday as three of her US and Russian colleagues [made a safe return from the orbiting space lab](#) to the Kazakh steppe.

The Soyuz TMA-04M capsule made a pin-point landing with US astronaut Joe Acaba and Russian cosmonauts [Gennady Padalka](#) and Sergei Revin aboard a vessel whose origins stretch back to the early days of Soviet [space](#) flight.

NASA television footage showed the smiling men relaxing in lounge

chairs and sipping warm drinks from thermoses while medical teams checked their pulses and chatted to them about their trip.

"It's good to be home," a NASA official quoted Acaba as saying the moment he was pulled out of the Russian capsule to mark the formal end of his 125-day stay in space.

The crew then set what may become a new tradition by signing their names on the black [Soyuz capsule](#) in honour of their journey.

"I have not seen that before," a NASA television commentator observed.

The three leave behind another trio led by new commander Suni Williams—a US space veteran who has logged the most days in orbit by a woman as well as the greatest number of hours conducting space walks.

"I appreciate all the lessons learned and all the great humour that we have had up here," Williams told outgoing commander Padalka in televised images moments before the hand-off.

"It has been a lot of fun and that is mostly because of you and your crew. And we hope that our crew ... can maintain that and pass it on" when the replacement team comes up at the end of next month.

Williams is now in charge of a crew also comprised of Japan's Aki Hoshide and the Russian Yury Malenchenko.

She had seen the trio off with warm hugs as they clambered on board the Soyuz through an escape hatch already dressed in their puffy white travel [space suits](#).

The trio on board the ISS had been set to be joined by a new expedition on October 17.

But Russian space officials said they may have to delay the next lift-off by about a week due to the necessary replacement of a piece of [Soyuz TMA-06M](#) on-board equipment.

"This will give us time to relax and conduct all the work properly and without any added pressure," Russian Federal Space Agency (Roscosmos) chief Vladimir Popovkin said in televised remarks.

Russia's once-proud space programme has been beset by problems in the past two years that have seen unmanned vessels explode before reaching orbit and high-profile space exploration missions go awry.

The setbacks are a particular concern to NASA as it undergoes a transition from the phased-out Shuttle programme and relies in the interim on Russia and its Soviet-era equipment for all manned trips to space.

But Russia has an unblemished record with manned flight and is currently developing its own replacement for the reliable but increasingly outdated Soyuz system that could carry heavier payloads and more people up to the ISS.

The orbiter is now spinning about 350 kilometres (220 miles) above Earth with Williams at the controls—only the second woman to take charge of the orbiting research centre since its initial launch in 1998.

The US Naval Academy-trained pilot will celebrate her 47th birthday in space on Wednesday, having accomplished an honour first bestowed on fellow NASA space pioneer Peggy Whitson in 2007.

Williams once worked as a diving officer and served in Iraq before working in Moscow in the 1990s with Roscosmos while helping prepare the very first ISS crew.

She blasted off into space for the first time in 2006 and is scheduled to return to Earth with her two current crew mates in January.

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