

Veteran NASA spacewoman getting three extra months in orbit (Update)

April 5 2017, by Marcia Dunn



In this Jan. 13, 2017 photo made available by NASA, astronaut Peggy Whitson, center, floats inside the Quest airlock of the International Space Station with Thomas Pesquet, left, and Shane Kimbrough before their spacewalk. On Wednesday, April 5, 2017, NASA announced that Whitson will remain on the ISS until September 2017, adding three months to her original mission. (NASA via AP)

The world's oldest and most experienced spacewoman is getting three

extra months in orbit.

NASA announced Wednesday that astronaut Peggy Whitson will remain on the International Space Station until September. The 57-year-old astronaut arrived last November and was supposed to return to Earth in June. But under an agreement between NASA and the Russian Space Agency, she'll stay another three months and take advantage of an empty seat on a Soyuz capsule in the fall.

This mission—her third—will now last close to 10 months. Scientists are eager to monitor any changes to her body, to add to the knowledge gained from retired astronaut Scott Kelly's recent one-year flight.

The two men she flew up with in November—France's Thomas Pesquet and Russia's Oleg Novitskiy—will return in June without her.

Whitson has already spent more time in space than any other woman, counting all her missions, and just last week set a record for the most spacewalks by a woman, with eight.

This weekend, she'll take over as space station commander, her second time at the job.

And on April 24, she'll set a new U.S. record for most accumulated time in space. That NASA record—534 days—is currently held by former space station resident Jeffrey Williams.

Whitson welcomed Wednesday's news.

"I love being up here," she said in a statement. "Living and working aboard the space station is where I feel like I make the greatest contribution, so I am constantly trying to squeeze every drop out of my time here. Having three more months to squeeze is just what I would

wish for."

NASA's space station program director, Kirk Shireman, said Whitson's skill and experience make her "an incredible asset" up there, and her extra time will be put to good use.

There will be a return seat for Whitson in September because the Soyuz due to launch later this month will carry up one American and one Russian, one person fewer than usual. Russia is temporarily cutting back to two station residents. With Whitson's extended stay, the orbiting outpost will continue to have a full crew of six.

Whitson, a biochemist who grew up on a farm in Iowa, became an astronaut in 1996. She served as NASA's chief astronaut from 2009 to 2012, the only woman to ever hold the job.

More information: NASA:

www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/main/index.html

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