

Record-breaking Astronaut Peggy Whitson returns to Earth

September 3 2017, by Marcia Dunn



U.S. astronaut Peggy Annette Whitson smiles after landing in a remote area outside the town of Dzhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. The Soyuz capsule carrying astronauts Peggy Whitson and Jack Fischer of NASA and Fyodor Yurchikhin of the Russian space agency Roscosmos safely returned to Earth in the Kazakh steppe. (Sergei Ilnitsky/Pool Photo via AP)

Astronaut Peggy Whitson returned to Earth late Saturday, wrapping up a record-breaking flight that catapulted her to first place for U.S. space endurance.

Whitson's 665 days off the planet—288 days on this mission alone—exceeds that of any other American and any other woman worldwide.

She checked out of the International Space Station just hours earlier, along with another American and a Russian. Their Soyuz capsule landed in Kazakhstan shortly after sunrise Sunday—Saturday night back in the U.S.

Whitson was the last one carried from the Soyuz. She immediately received a pair of sunglasses to put on, as she rested in a chair on the barren, wind-swept Kazak steppes. Medical personnel took her pulse, standard practice. She then received a bouquet of flowers with the greeting, "Welcome back, Peggy."

Besides duration, Whitson set multiple other records while in orbit: world's oldest spacewoman, at age 57, and most experienced female spacewalker, with 10. She also became the first woman to command the space station twice following her launch last November.

Returning cosmonaut Fyodor Yurchikhin logged even more time in space: 673 days over five missions. NASA astronaut Jack Fischer returned after 136 days aloft. The men flew up in April.



Russian cosmonaut Fyodor Yurchikhin, center, U.S. astronauts Peggy Whitson, left, and Jack Fischer, right, pose for a photo after landing in a remote area outside the town of Dzhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. The Soyuz capsule carrying Astronauts Peggy Whitson and Jack Fischer of NASA and Fyodor Yurchikhin of the Russian space agency Roscosmos safely returned to Earth in the Kazakh steppe. (Sergei Ilnitsky/Pool Photo via AP)

All three briefly held hands for a photo op, before being carried one by one in their chairs to the medical tent.

It was an emotional farewell to the space station for Whitson, Yurchikhin and Fischer. Before retreating into their Soyuz, they embraced the three colleagues they were leaving behind at the 250-mile-high complex. Yurchikhin patted the inside of the station before floating into his Soyuz for the final time.

The station's newest commander, Randy Bresnik, noted the outpost was

losing 1,474 days of spaceflight experience with the departure of Whitson, Yurchikhin and Fischer. Four years and two weeks, he pointed out.

"We are in your debt for the supreme dedication that you guys have to the human mission of exploration," Bresnik told them on the eve of their departure. He offered up special praise for Whitson—"American space ninja"—and wished them all Godspeed.



Ground personnel help U.S. astronaut Peggy Whitson after landing in a remote area outside the town of Dzhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. The Soyuz capsule carrying astronauts Peggy Whitson and Jack Fischer of NASA and Fyodor Yurchikhin of the Russian space agency Roscosmos safely returned to Earth in the Kazakh steppe. (Sergei Ilnitsky/Pool Photo via AP)

Yurchikhin is now No. 7 on the world's all-time endurance list, followed

by Whitson at No. 8. The top spot belongs to Russian Gennady Padalka, with 879 days in space over five flights.

Whitson, a biochemist, set a breakneck pace on all three of her space station expeditions, continually asking for more—and still more—scientific research to do. Scientists on the ground said it often was hard to keep up with her. She even experimented on food up there, trying to add some pizzazz to the standard freeze-dried meals. Tortillas transformed into apple pies on her watch.

Whitson was supposed to fly back in June after a half-year in space. But when an extra seat opened up on this Soyuz, she jumped at the chance to stay in orbit an extra three months. Only one other American—yearlong spaceman Scott Kelly—has spent longer in [space](#) on a single mission.

Except for the past week, Whitson said her mission hurried by. She's hungry for pizza and can't wait to use a regular flush toilet again. She's also eager to reunite with her husband, Clarence Sams, a biochemist who also works at Johnson Space Center in Houston.



Expedition 52 NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson is helped out of the Soyuz MS-04 spacecraft minutes after she, and Roscosmos cosmonaut Fyodor Yurchikhin and NASA astronaut Jack Fischer landed in a remote area near Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. Astronaut Whitson returned to Earth late Saturday (in the U.S.), wrapping up a record-breaking flight that catapulted her to first place for U.S. space endurance. (Bill Ingalls/NASA via AP)

Because of the effects of Hurricane Harvey, NASA could not get its plane from Houston to Kazakhstan in time for the crew's landing. Instead, the European Space Agency offered to transport Whitson and Fischer to Cologne, Germany, where they will meet up with the NASA plane for the final leg of their journey. They were due back in Houston on Sunday night.

Three men remain at the [space station](#): Bresnik, a Russian and an Italian. They will be joined by two Americans and a Russian following liftoff from Kazakhstan on Sept. 12.



The Soyuz MS-04 spacecraft lands with Expedition 52 Commander Fyodor Yurchikhin of Roscosmos and Flight Engineers Peggy Whitson and Jack Fischer of NASA near the town of Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. Astronaut Whitson returned to Earth late Saturday (in the U.S.), wrapping up a record-breaking flight that catapulted her to first place for U.S. space endurance. (Bill Ingalls/NASA via AP)



Expedition 52 Roscosmos cosmonaut Fyodor Yurchikhin is helped out of the Soyuz MS-04 spacecraft minutes after he and NASA astronauts Peggy Whitson and Jack Fischer landed in a remote area near Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. Astronaut Whitson returned to Earth late Saturday (in the U.S.), wrapping up a record-breaking flight that catapulted her to first place for U.S. space endurance. (Bill Ingalls/NASA via AP)



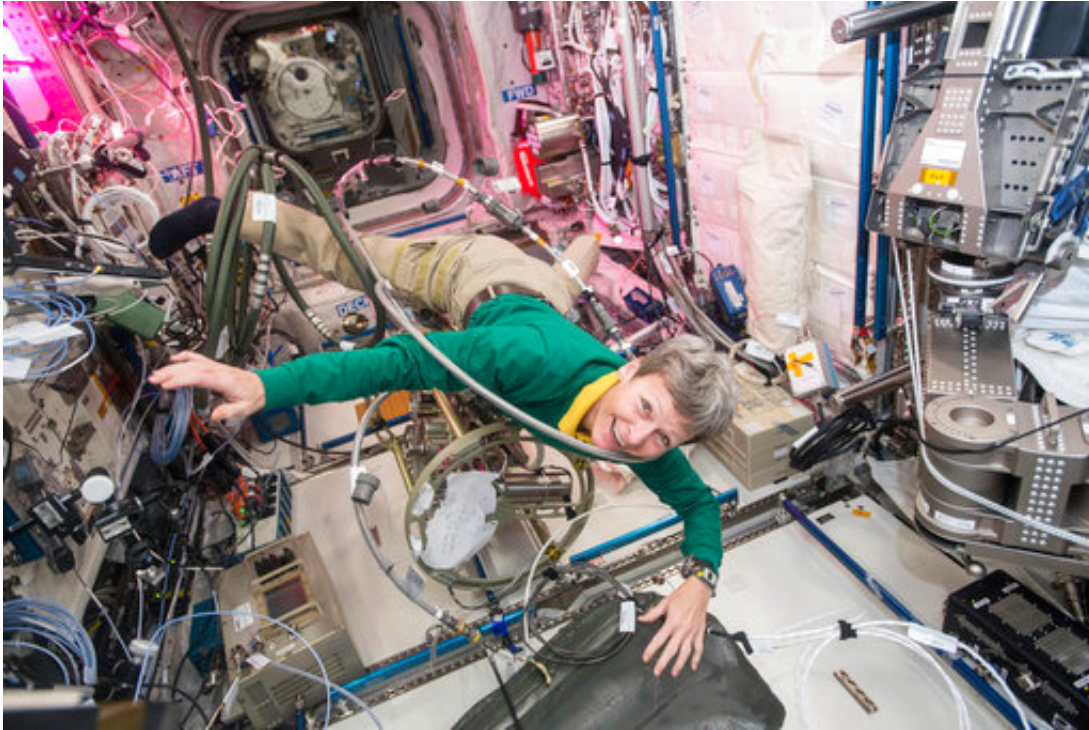
Expedition 52 Flight Engineer Peggy Whitson, from left, Commander Fyodor Yurchikhin of Roscosmos and Flight Engineer Jack Fischer of NASA, are seen inside the Soyuz MS-04 spacecraft shortly after it landed near the town of Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. Astronaut Whitson returned to Earth late Saturday (in the U.S.), wrapping up a record-breaking flight that catapulted her to first place for U.S. space endurance. (Bill Ingalls/NASA via AP)



Expedition 52 NASA astronaut Jack Fischer is helped out of the Soyuz MS-04 spacecraft minutes after he and NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson and Roscosmos cosmonaut Fyodor Yurchikhin landed in a remote area near the town of Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, Sunday, Sept. 3, 2017. Astronaut Whitson returned to Earth late Saturday (in the U.S.), wrapping up a record-breaking flight that catapulted her to first place for U.S. space endurance. (Bill Ingalls/NASA via AP)



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In this Dec. 8, 2016 photo made available by NASA, astronaut Peggy Whitson floats through a tangle of cables inside the Columbus module aboard the International Space Station. Whitson was operating the Fluids System Servicer to refill coolant loops in multiple modules on the U.S. segment of the station. (NASA via AP)



In this Jan. 6, 2017 made available by NASA, astronaut Peggy Whitson works during a spacewalk outside the International Space Station. Whitson and fellow astronaut Shane Kimbrough successfully installed three new adapter plates and hooked up electrical connections for three of the six new lithium-ion batteries on the ISS. (NASA via AP)



In this image posted to her Twitter feed on May 30, 2017, astronaut Peggy Whitson holds up Chinese cabbage grown in the International Space Station. During her third and latest mission, which began November 2016, the 57-year-old biochemist became the oldest woman in space. (NASA via AP)



In this Wednesday, Oct 10, 2007 file photo, U.S. astronaut Peggy Whitson, center, commander of the 16th mission for the International Space Station, smiles just before the launch of the Russian Soyuz rocket at the Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan. Whitson, who was the first woman to command the station, was handed a symbolic Kazakh whip to manage the crew. (AP Photo/Mikhail Metzel)



In this Wednesday June 5, 2002 file photo, Space shuttle Endeavour commander Kenneth Cockrell, right, and pilot Paul Lockhart lead the way out of crew quarters followed by, second row from left, Valeri Korzun, Peggy Whitson, and Sergei Treschev; third row from left are Philippe Perrin and Franklin Chang-Diaz at Cape Canaveral, Fla., before their launch later in the day. (AP Photo/Peter Cosgrove)

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