

Astronauts arrive for NASA's 1st home launch in decade

May 20 2020, by Marcia Dunn



NASA astronauts Bob Behnken, left, and Doug Hurley wave as they leave a news conference after they arrived at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

The two astronauts who will end a nine-year launch drought for NASA arrived at Kennedy Space Center on Wednesday, exactly one week before their historic SpaceX flight.

It will be the first time a private company, rather than a national government, sends astronauts into orbit.

NASA test pilots Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken flew to Florida from their home base in Houston aboard one of the space agency's jets.

"It's an incredible time for NASA and the space program, once again launching U.S. crews from Florida and hopefully in just a week from about right now," Hurley told reporters minutes after arriving.

Hurley was one of the four astronauts who arrived at Kennedy on July 4, 2011, for the final space shuttle flight, "so it's incredibly humbling to be here to start out the next launch from the United States."

"We feel it as an opportunity but also a responsibility for the American people, for the SpaceX team, for all of NASA," Behnken added.

The two are scheduled to blast off next Wednesday afternoon atop a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, bound for the International Space Station. They'll soar from the same pad where Atlantis closed out the shuttle program in 2011, the last home launch for NASA astronauts.



NASA astronaut Bob Behnken arrives at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. Behnken and NASA astronaut Doug Hurley will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

Since then, the only way to the space station for astronauts has been on Russian rockets launched from Kazakhstan.

Hurley and Behnken still don't know how long they'll spend at the space station: anywhere between one and four months. Only one American is up there right now—astronaut Chris Cassidy—and could use a hand. Hurley said he got an email from Cassidy on Tuesday night in which he wrote that "he's looking forward to seeing our ugly mugs on board."

Greeting the astronauts at Kennedy's former shuttle landing strip were the center's director, former shuttle commander Robert Cabana, and NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine.

"You really are a bright light for all of America right now," Bridenstine told them.

The welcoming committee was reduced drastically in size because of the coronavirus pandemic. There were no handshakes for the astronauts, who did not wear masks but kept their distance at separate microphones. Cabana and Bridenstine wore masks except while addressing the crowd; so did the approximately 20 journalists standing more than 20 feet (6 meters) away.



NASA astronaut Doug Hurley arrives at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. Hurley and NASA astronaut Robert Behnken will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/John Raoux)



NASA astronauts Robert Behnken , left, and Doug Hurley speak during a news conference after they arrived at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/John Raoux)



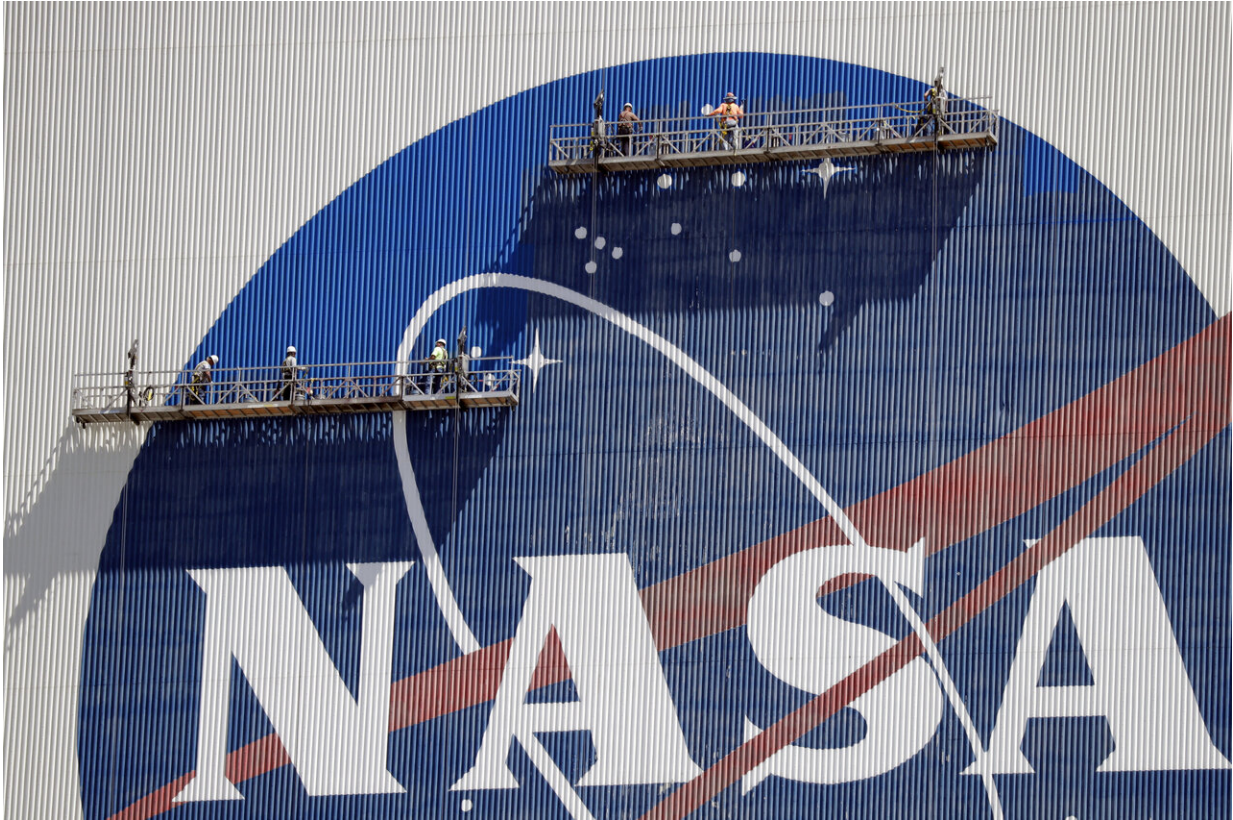
In this photo provided by NASA, astronauts Robert Behnken, left, and Douglas Hurley speak during a news conference after they arrived at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (Bill Ingalls/NASA via AP)



NASA astronauts Robert Behnken, left, and Doug Hurley pose for a photo at a news conference after they arrived at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch on May 27. (AP Photo/John Raoux)



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Workers near the top of the 526 ft. Vehicle Assembly Building at the Kennedy Space Center spruce up the NASA logo standing on scaffolds in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket scheduled for May 27 will launch a Crew Dragon spacecraft on its first test flight with astronauts on-board to the International Space Station. (AP Photo/John Raoux)



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Workers near the top of the 526 ft. Vehicle Assembly Building at the Kennedy Space Center spruce up the NASA logo standing on scaffolds in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 20, 2020. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket scheduled for May 27 will launch a Crew Dragon spacecraft on its first test flight with astronauts on-board to the International Space Station. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

During these tough times, Bridenstine said, "this is a moment when we can all look and be inspired as to what the future holds."

NASA's [commercial crew program](#) has been years in the making. Boeing, the competing company, isn't expected to launch its first astronauts until next year.

As the trailblazers, Hurley and Behnken are establishing new prelaunch

traditions. They shared two at Bridenstine's request Wednesday.

Hurley, a former Marine and fighter pilot, followed military tradition and put a mission sticker on the SpaceX flight simulator in Houston on Tuesday, after completing training. Behnken, an Air Force colonel, followed Russian custom and planted a tree. He had help back home from his wife, who's also an astronaut, and their 6-year-old son.

"My son will always have that lemon tree that he was a part of planting," Behnken said. "Hopefully, it makes it through Houston's hot summer this year and becomes a tradition for some other folks as well."

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