

SpaceX returns 4 astronauts to Earth, ending 200-day flight

November 9 2021, by Marcia Dunn



In this photo provided by NASA, from left to right, European Space Agency astronaut Thomas Pesquet, NASA astronauts Megan McArthur and Shane Kimbrough, and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency astronaut Akihiko Hoshide gesture inside the SpaceX Dragon spacecraft onboard the SpaceX GO Navigator recovery ship shortly after having landed in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Pensacola, Fla., Monday, Nov. 8, 2021. The astronauts returned to Earth on Monday to end a 200-day space station mission that began last spring. Credit: Aubrey Gemignani/NASA via AP

Four astronauts returned to Earth on Monday, riding home with SpaceX to end a 200-day space station mission that began last spring.

Their capsule streaked through the late night sky like a dazzling meteor before parachuting into the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Pensacola, Florida. Recovery boats quickly moved in with spotlights.

"On behalf of SpaceX, welcome home to Planet Earth," SpaceX Mission Control radioed from Southern California. Within an hour, all four astronauts were out of the capsule, exchanging fist bumps with the team on the recovery ship.

Their homecoming—coming just eight hours after leaving the International Space Station—paved the way for SpaceX's launch of their four replacements as early as Wednesday night.

The newcomers were scheduled to launch first, but NASA switched the order because of bad weather and an astronaut's undisclosed medical condition. The welcoming duties will now fall to the lone American and two Russians left behind at the space station.

Before Monday afternoon's undocking, German astronaut Matthias Maurer, who's waiting to launch at NASA's Kennedy Space Center, tweeted it was a shame the two crews wouldn't overlap at the space station but "we trust you'll leave everything nice and tidy." His will be SpaceX's fourth crew flight for NASA in just 1 1/2 years.



In this image taken from NASA video, the crew of the SpaceX Dragon capsule react after splashing down into the Gulf of Mexico near Pensacola, Fla., late Monday Nov. 8, 2021, to end a 200-day space station mission that began last spring. Credit: NASA via AP

NASA astronauts Shane Kimbrough and Megan McArthur, Japan's Akihiko Hoshide and France's Thomas Pesquet should have been back Monday morning, but high wind in the recovery zone delayed their return.

"One more night with this magical view. Who could complain? I'll miss our spaceship!" Pesquet tweeted Sunday alongside a brief video showing the space station illuminated against the blackness of space and the twinkling city lights on the nighttime side of Earth.

From the space station, NASA astronaut Mark Vande Hei—midway

through a one-year flight—bid farewell to each of his departing friends, telling McArthur "I'll miss hearing your laughter in adjacent modules."

Before leaving the neighborhood, the four took a spin around the space station, taking pictures. This was a first for SpaceX; NASA's shuttles used to do it all the time before their retirement a decade ago. The last Russian capsule fly-around was three years ago.



In this image taken from NASA video, parachutes are deployed from the SpaceX Dragon capsule, carrying four astronauts, as it descends before splashing down into the Gulf of Mexico near Pensacola, Fla., late Monday Nov. 8, 2021, to end a 200-day space station mission that began last spring. Credit: NASA via AP

It wasn't the most comfortable ride back. The toilet in their capsule was broken, and so the astronauts needed to rely on diapers for the eight-hour trip home. They shrugged it off late last week as just one more

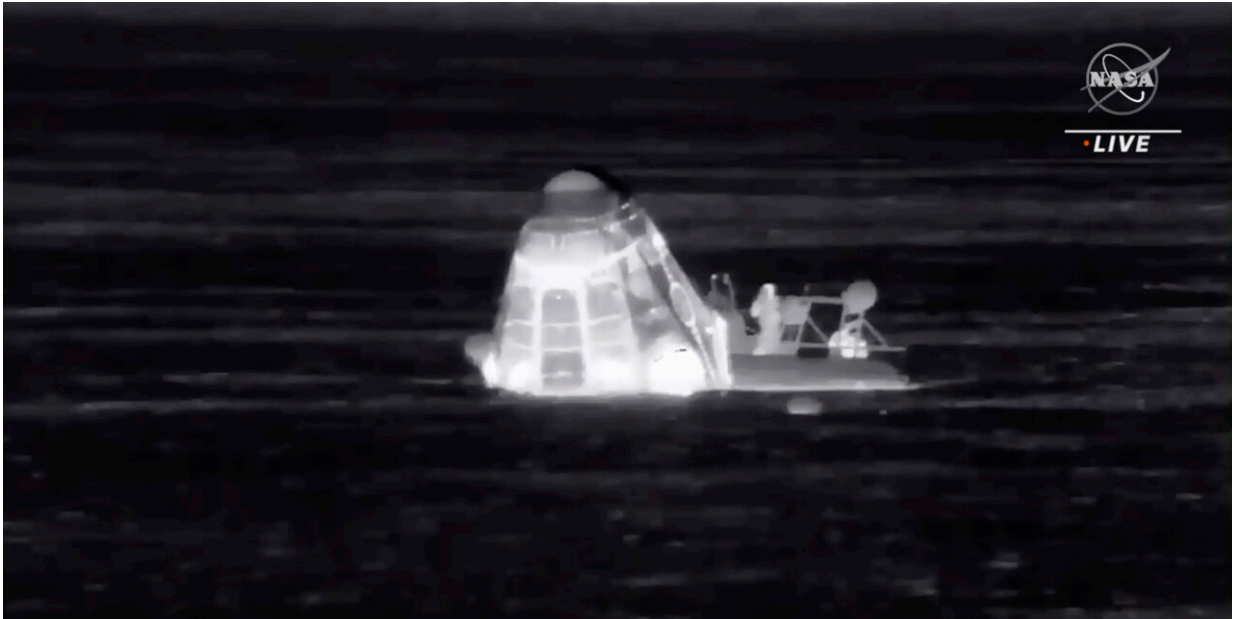
challenge in their mission.

The first issue arose shortly after their April liftoff; Mission Control warned a piece of space junk was threatening to collide with their capsule. It turned out to be a false alarm. Then in July, thrusters on a newly arrived Russian lab inadvertently fired and sent the station into a spin. The four astronauts took shelter in their docked SpaceX capsule, ready to make a hasty departure if necessary.

Among the upbeat milestones: four spacewalks to enhance the station's solar power, a movie-making visit by a Russian film crew and the first-ever space harvest of chile peppers.



In this image taken from NASA video, the SpaceX Dragon capsule, carrying four astronauts, parachutes into the Gulf of Mexico near Pensacola, Fla., late Monday Nov. 8, 2021, as it returned to Earth to end a 200-day space station mission that began last spring. Credit: NASA via AP



In this image taken from NASA video, the SpaceX Dragon capsule, carrying four astronauts, is recovered after splashing down into the Gulf of Mexico near Pensacola, Fla., late Monday Nov. 8, 2021, to end a 200-day space station mission that began last spring. Credit: NASA via AP



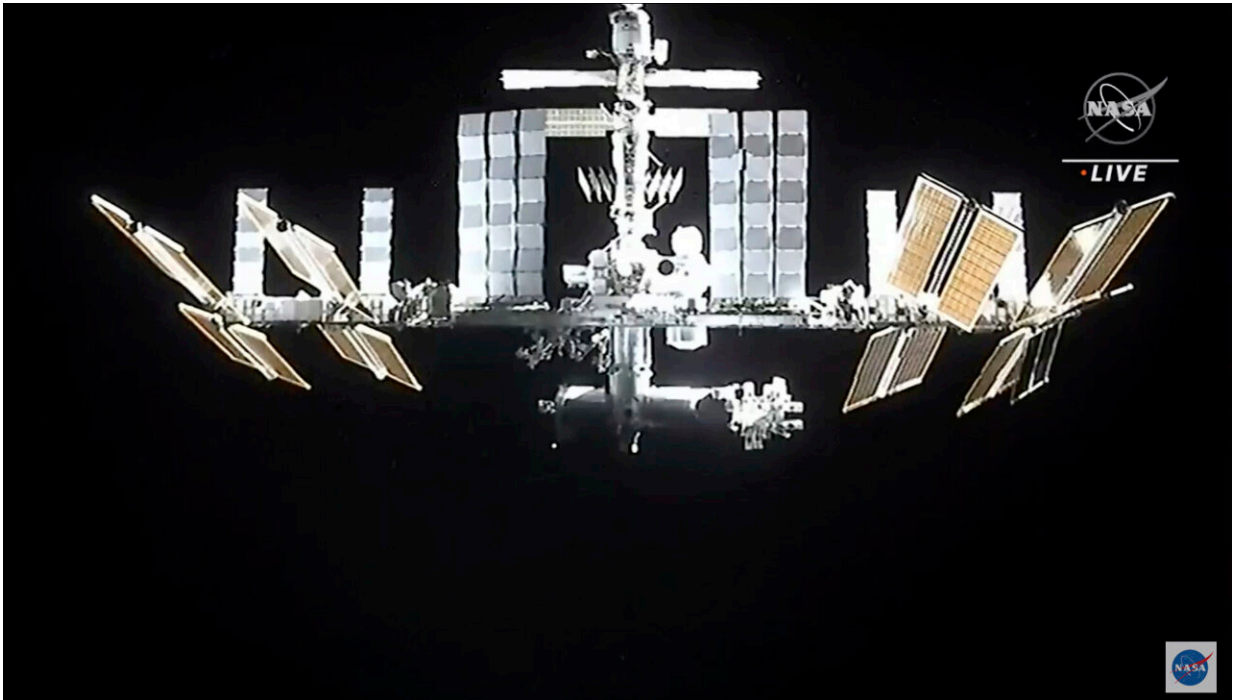
In this image taken from NASA video, the SpaceX Dragon capsule, carrying four astronauts, splashes down into the Gulf of Mexico near Pensacola, Fla., late Monday Nov. 8, 2021, as it returned to Earth to end a 200-day space station mission that began last spring. Credit: NASA via AP



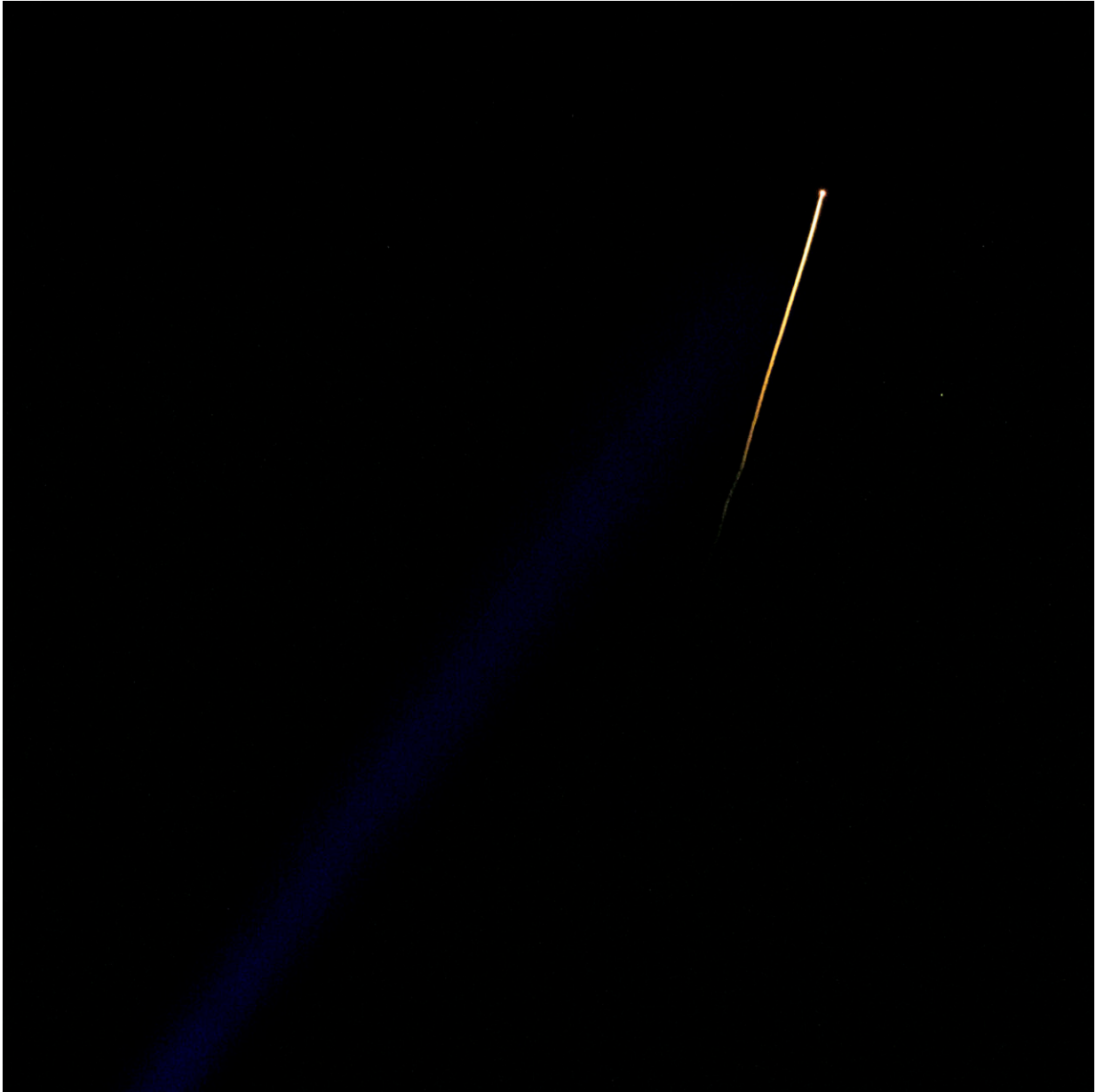
In this image from video provided by NASA, astronauts in the SpaceX Dragon capsule undock from the International Space Station on Monday, Nov. 8, 2021, Credit: NASA via AP



In this image provided by NASA, a SpaceX capsule is seen as it lands with NASA astronauts Shane Kimbrough and Megan McArthur, Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) astronaut Aki Hoshide and ESA (European Space Agency) astronaut Thomas Pesquet aboard in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Pensacola, Fla., late Monday, Nov. 8, 2021. Credit: Aubrey Gemignani/NASA via AP



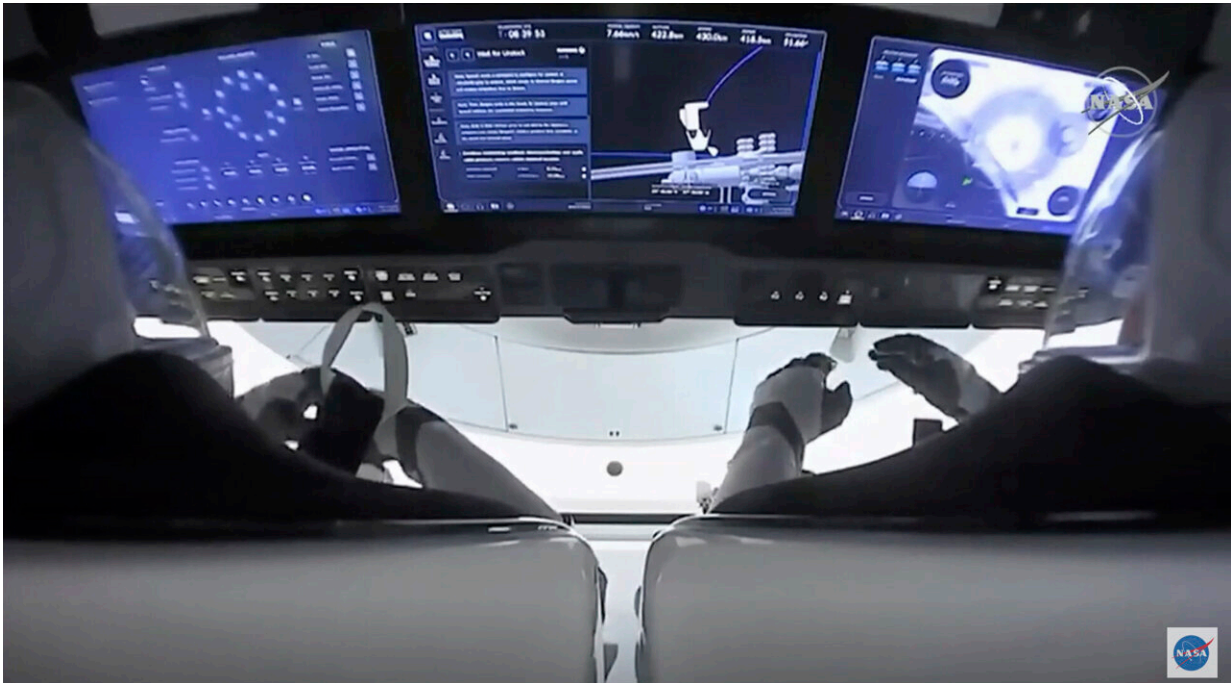
In this image from video provided by NASA, the International Space Station is seen as astronauts in the SpaceX Dragon capsule undock on Monday, Nov. 8, 2021, Credit: NASA via AP



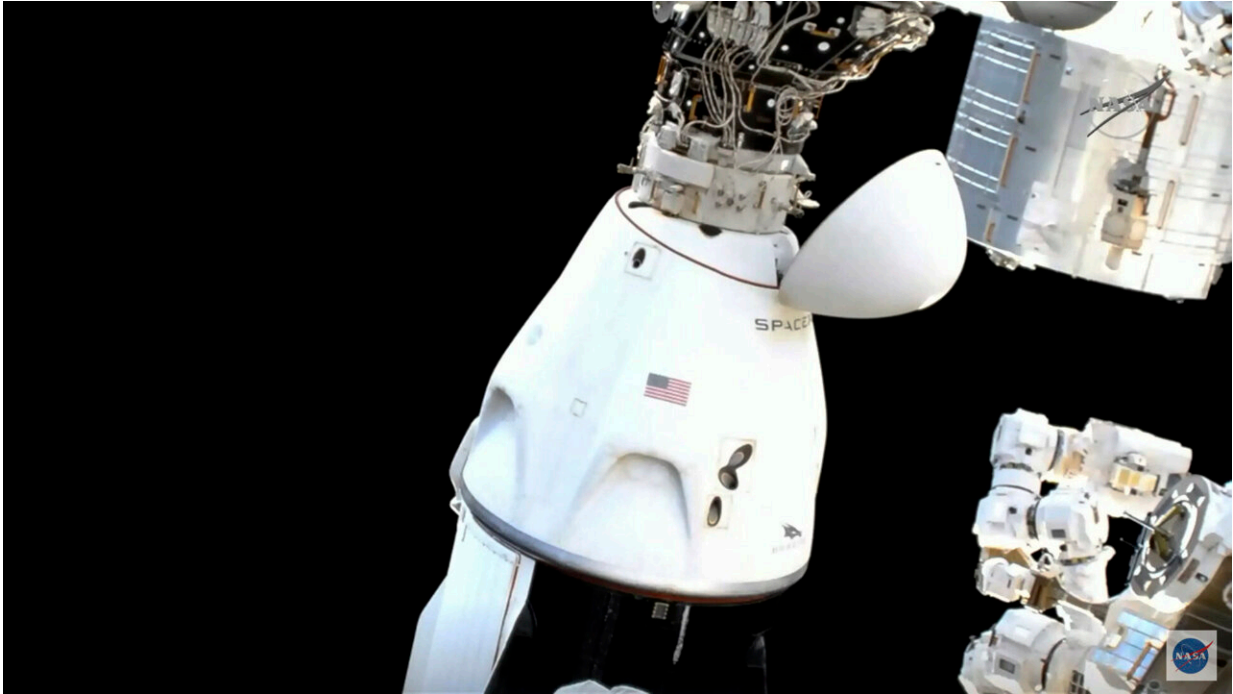
In this image provided by NASA, a SpaceX capsule is seen as it lands with NASA astronauts Shane Kimbrough and Megan McArthur, Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) astronaut Aki Hoshide and ESA (European Space Agency) astronaut Thomas Pesquet aboard in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Pensacola, Fla., late Monday, Nov. 8, 2021. Credit: Aubrey Gemignani/NASA via AP



In this image from video provided by NASA, astronauts in the SpaceX Dragon capsule prepare for undocking from the International Space Station on Monday, Nov. 8, 2021, Credit: NASA via AP



In this image from video provided by NASA, astronauts in the SpaceX Dragon capsule prepare for undocking from the International Space Station on Monday, Nov. 8, 2021, Credit: NASA via AP



In this image from video provided by NASA, astronauts in the SpaceX Dragon capsule prepare for undocking from the International Space Station on Monday, Nov. 8, 2021, Credit: NASA via AP

The next crew will also spend six months up there, welcoming back-to-back groups of tourists. A Japanese tycoon and his personal assistant will get a lift from the Russian Space Agency in December, followed by three businessmen arriving via SpaceX in February. SpaceX's first privately chartered flight, in September, bypassed the space station.

NASA's Kathy Lueders, head of space operations, said engineers would evaluate the lagging inflation of one of the four main parachutes, something seen in testing when the lines bunch together. Overall, though, "the return looked spotless."

"I can't tell you how excited I am to see all four of the crew members

back on Earth," she added, "and I'm looking forward to launching another set of four this week."

© 2021 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: SpaceX returns 4 astronauts to Earth, ending 200-day flight (2021, November 9) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-11-iss-astronauts-earth-spacex-craft.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.