

SpaceX crew launch marks 600 space travelers in 60 years

November 11 2021, by Marcia Dunn



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket with the Crew Dragon capsule lifts off from Launch Pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux

A SpaceX rocket carried four astronauts into orbit Wednesday night,

including the 600th person to reach space in 60 years.

The repeatedly delayed flight occurred just two days after SpaceX brought four other astronauts home from the International Space Station. They should have been up there to welcome the newcomers, but NASA and SpaceX decided to switch the order based on Monday's ideal recovery weather in the Gulf of Mexico and pulled it off.

"It was a great ride, better than we imagined," mission commander Raja Chari said shortly after the spacecraft reached orbit.

The launch was just as riveting for spectators at NASA's Kennedy Space Center, as well as along the East Coast, as the Falcon rocket thundered through clouds on its way to space, turning night into day.

Germany's Matthias Maurer claimed the No. 600 position, according to NASA, based on his mission assignment. He and his three NASA crewmates should arrive at the space station in under 24 hours, well over a week late.

One of the astronauts—NASA isn't saying which one—was sidelined last week by an undisclosed medical issue. The crew member is fully recovered, according to NASA. Officials won't say whether it was an illness or injury, but noted it wasn't COVID-19.



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Bad weather also contributed to their flight delays. Chari said trying to launch on Halloween left them with "a trick instead of a treat." It was also drizzling Wednesday night when the four astronauts said goodbye to their families for six months—with everyone huddling under umbrellas—but it cleared up by launch time.

"Enjoy your holidays among the stars. We'll be waving as you fly by," SpaceX launch director Mark Soltys radioed to the crew.

The list of 600 travelers ranges from those who have barely scratched space—like actor William Shatner last month—to U.S. and Russian astronauts who have spent a year or more in orbit. This year's surge in space tourists helped push the tally over the 600 mark.

That averages out to 10 people per year since Yuri Gagarin's pioneering flight in 1961, Maurer noted.



Photographers are silhouetted as a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket with the Crew Dragon attached lifts off Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Credit: AP Photo/Chris O'Meara

"But I think in a very few years, we will see an exponential rise of that one because now we're entering the era of commercial spaceflight," he said after arriving at Kennedy Space Center two weeks ago.

The crew launch marked SpaceX's fourth for NASA and the company's fifth passenger flight overall—including a September charter flight for four that skipped the space station. The Dragon capsule's toilet leaked during their three days in orbit, necessitating a quick redesign of the flushing system in the newest capsule, named Endurance by its crew.

A balky parachute during Monday's descent had SpaceX engineers poring over the data, before giving the go-ahead for Wednesday's launch. One of the four chutes opened more than a minute late, a problem seen in testing and well within safety limits, but still being examined, officials said.



Guests watch the launch of a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket carrying the company's Crew Dragon spacecraft on NASA's SpaceX Crew-3 mission with NASA astronauts Raja Chari, Tom Marshburn, Kayla Barron, and European Space Agency astronaut Matthias Maurer onboard, Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, from the balcony of Operations Support Building II at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Credit: Joel Kowsky/NASA via AP

As of Wednesday, Elon Musk's company has launched 18 people in 18

months.

"Human spaceflight was the reason we were founded, so it's incredibly meaningful for the whole team," said Sarah Walker, a SpaceX manager.

The European Space Agency's Mauer is one of three newbies on the crew. The 51-year-old was a finalist when he first applied to be an astronaut. Encouraged, he left his research job at a medical company and joined the space agency as an engineer, and made the astronaut cut in 2015.

Chari, 44, is an Air Force colonel and the first space rookie in decades to lead a mission to orbit for NASA. A [test pilot](#) from Cedar Falls, Iowa, Chari accumulated more than 2,500 hours in fighter jets, including combat missions in Iraq.

Also on board:

— Dr. Thomas Marshburn, 61, will be the oldest person to live aboard the space station and perform a spacewalk. Born in Statesville, North Carolina, he pursued a career in emergency medicine, then joined NASA in 1994 as a flight surgeon. This is his third trip to the [space station](#).

— Kayla Barron, 34, a Navy lieutenant commander from Richland, Washington. She was among the first women to serve as submarine warfare officers. Added to the flight in May, she's No. 601 in [space](#).

During their station stay, they will welcome two groups of tourists. A Russian film crew recently spent two weeks at the station, making a movie.



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Astronauts, from left, Tom Marshburn, Matthias Maurer, of Germany, Raja Chari and Kayla Barron wave as they leave the Operations and Checkout building for a trip to Launch Pad 39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The four astronauts are scheduled to fly on SpaceX's Crew-3 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



NASA astronaut Tom Marshburn, center, smiles as he stands under an umbrella after leaving the Operations and Checkout Building for a trip to Launch Pad 39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The four astronauts are scheduled to fly on SpaceX's Crew-3 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



Astronaut Matthias Maurer, of Germany, waves as he gets into a car before a trip to Launch Pad-39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The four astronauts are scheduled to fly on SpaceX's Crew-3 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



European Space Agency astronaut Matthias Maurer, of Germany, waves as he gets into a car before a trip to Launch Pad-39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. SpaceX counted down Wednesday toward a nighttime launch of four astronauts who have been grounded for nearly two weeks by weather and medical delays. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



Astronauts Tom Marshburn, right, and Kayla Barron talk to family members before heading to Launch Pad 39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The four astronauts are scheduled to fly on SpaceX's Crew-3 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



Astronaut Raja Chari stands under an umbrella as he talks to family members before heading to Launch Pad 39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. SpaceX counted down Wednesday toward a nighttime launch of four astronauts who have been grounded for nearly two weeks by weather and medical delays. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



Astronaut Matthias Maurer, of Germany, makes a heart symbol with his hands as he is strapped into a vehicle for a trip to Launch Pad-39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. SpaceX counted down Wednesday toward a nighttime launch of four astronauts who have been grounded for nearly two weeks by weather and medical delays. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



Astronauts, from left, Matthias Maurer, of Germany, Tom Marshburn, Raja Chari, and Kayla Barron pose for a photo after leaving the Operations and Checkout Building for a trip to Launch Pad 39-A Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The four astronauts are scheduled to fly on SpaceX's Crew-3 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket with the Crew Dragon capsule stands ready on Launch Pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2021. The launch is scheduled for Wednesday evening. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



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From left, European Space Agency astronaut Matthias Maurer of Germany, and NASA astronauts Tom Marshburn, Raja Chari, and Kayla Barron gather for a photo after arriving at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., on Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021. SpaceX counted down Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021 toward a nighttime launch the four astronauts who have been grounded for nearly two weeks by weather and medical delays. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



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The new crew will be joining three station residents—two Russians and NASA's Mark Vande Hei, who celebrated his 55th birthday on Wednesday.

"NASA and @SpaceX are lighting a big candle in the sky for you tonight," NASA tweeted before the launch.

That candle—the first-stage booster—landed upright on an ocean barge.

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