

SpaceX launches 4 astronauts for NASA after private flight

April 27 2022, by Marcia Dunn



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket lifts off from pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, April 27, 2022. NASA astronauts Kjell Lindgren, Robert Hines, and Jessica Watkins, and European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti on the Crew Dragon spacecraft begin a six-month expedition on the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux

SpaceX launched four astronauts to the International Space Station for NASA on Wednesday, less than two days after completing a flight chartered by millionaires.

It's the first NASA crew comprised equally of men and women, including the first Black woman making a long-term spaceflight, Jessica Watkins.

"This is one of the most diversified, I think, crews that we've had in a really, really long time," said NASA's space operations mission chief Kathy Lueders.

The astronauts arrived at the space station Wednesday night, just 16 hours after a predawn liftoff from Kennedy Space Center that thrilled spectators.

"Anyone who saw it realized what a beautiful launch it was," Lueders told reporters. After an express flight comparable to traveling from New York to Singapore, the crew will move in for a five-month stay.

SpaceX has now launched five crews for NASA and two private trips in just under two years. Elon Musk's company is having an especially busy few weeks: It just finished taking [three businessmen to and from the space station](#) as NASA's first private guests.

A week after the new crew arrives, the three Americans and German they're replacing will return to Earth in their own SpaceX capsule. Three Russians also live at the space station.



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Both SpaceX and NASA officials stressed they're taking it one step at a time to ensure safety. The private mission that concluded Monday encountered no major problems, they said, although high wind delayed the splashdown for a week.

SpaceX Launch Control wished the astronauts good luck and Godspeed moments before the Falcon rocket blasted off with the capsule, named

Freedom by its crew.

"Our heartfelt thank you to every one of you that made this possible. Now let Falcon roar and Freedom ring," radioed NASA astronaut Kjell Lindgren, the commander. Minutes later, their recycled booster had landed on an ocean platform and their capsule was safely orbiting Earth. "It was a great ride," he said.

The SpaceX capsules are fully automated—which opens the space gates to a broader clientele—and they're designed to accommodate a wider range of body sizes. At the same time, NASA and the European Space Agency have been pushing for more female astronauts.



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Lindgren, Robert Hines, and Jessica Watkins, and European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti on the Crew Dragon spacecraft begin a six-month expedition on the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux

While two Black women visited the space station during the shuttle era, neither moved in for a lengthy stay. Watkins, a geologist who is on NASA's short list for a moon-landing mission in the years ahead, sees her mission as "an important milestone, I think, both for the agency and for the country."

She credits supportive family and mentors—including Mae Jemison, the first Black woman in space in 1992—for "ultimately being able to live my dream."

Also cheering Watkins on was another geologist: Apollo 17's Harrison Schmitt, who walked on the moon in 1972. She invited the retired astronaut to the launch, along with his wife. "We sort of consider ourselves the Jessica team," he said, chuckling.

"Those of us who rode the Saturn V into space are a little bit jaded about the smaller rockets," Schmitt said after the SpaceX liftoff. "But still, it really was something and on board was a geologist ... I hope it will stand her in good stead for being part of one of the Artemis crews that go to the moon."



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Like Watkins, NASA astronaut and test pilot Bob Hines is making his first spaceflight. It's the second visit for Lindgren, a physician, and the European Space Agency's lone female astronaut, Samantha Cristoforetti, a former Italian Air Force fighter pilot.

Cristoforetti turned 45 on Tuesday, "so she really celebrates and is very happy with a big smile in the capsule," said the European Space Agency's director general, Josef Aschbacher. "She's really a role model and she's doing an enormously fabulous job on doing exactly that."

The just-completed private flight was NASA's first dip into space tourism after years of opposition. The space agency said the three people who paid \$55 million each to visit the space station blended in while doing experiments and educational outreach. They were accompanied by a former NASA astronaut employed by Houston-based Axiom Space, which arranged the flight.



SpaceX Crew-4 astronauts, from left, pilot Bob Hines, mission specialist Jessica Watkins, commander Kjell Lindgren, and European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, of Italy, wave as they leave the Operations and Checkout Building for a trip to Launch Complex 39-A Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The four astronauts will fly to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket lifts off from Launch Complex 39-A Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Four astronauts will fly on SpaceX's Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/Chris O'Meara



The SpaceX Crew-4 astronauts, from left, mission specialist Jessica Watkins, pilot Bob Hines, commander Kjell Lindgren, and mission specialist, European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, of Italy, get together after leaving the Operations and Checkout Building for a trip to Launch Complex 39-A Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The four astronauts will fly on SpaceX's Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



NASA astronaut Robert Hines waves to family and friends as he and crew mates depart the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building for Launch Complex 39A to board the SpaceX Crew Dragon spacecraft for the Crew-4 mission launch, Tuesday, April 26, 2022, at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Credit: Aubrey Gemignani, NASA via AP



NASA astronaut Robert Hines gestures to family and friends as he and crew mates depart the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building for Launch Complex 39A to board the SpaceX Crew Dragon spacecraft for the Crew-4 mission launch, Tuesday, April 26, 2022, at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Credit: Aubrey Gemignani, NASA via AP



NASA astronaut Bob Hines makes a hand gesture to family members after leaving the Operations and Checkout building and a trip to Launch Complex 39-A Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Four astronauts will fly on SpaceX's Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



NASA astronaut Kjell Lindgren waves as he leaves the Operations and Checkout Building for a trip to Launch Complex 39-A Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Four astronauts will fly on SpaceX's Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



NASA Mission specialist Jessica Watkins smiles as she talks to family members after leaving the Operations and Checkout building for a trip to Launch Complex 39-A Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Four astronauts will fly on SpaceX's Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



A SpaceX Falcon rocket sits on Launch Complex 39A Tuesday, April 26, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Four astronauts are scheduled to fly on SpaceX's mission to the International Space Station Wednesday morning. Credit: AP Photo/Chris O'Meara



European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, of Italy, waves as she leaves the Operations and Checkout Building Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Four astronauts will fly on SpaceX's Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/John Raoux



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In a slow camera exposure, SpaceX Falcon rocket launches Wednesday, April 27, from pad 39A at Kennedy Space Center to the ISS. NASA astronauts Kjell Lindgren, Bob Hines, and Jessica Watkins were joined by European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti. Time exposure of launch from Kelly Park on Merritt Island. Credit: Malcolm Denmark/Florida Today via AP



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Photographers record a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket as it lifts off in this time exposure from Launch Complex 39-A Wednesday, April 27, 2022, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Four astronauts will fly on SpaceX's Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: AP Photo/Chris O'Meara

"The International Space Station is not a vacation spot. It's not an amusement park. It is an international laboratory, and they absolutely understood and respected that purpose," said NASA flight director Zeb Scoville.

NASA also hired Boeing to ferry astronauts after retiring the shuttles. The company will take another shot next month at getting an empty crew capsule to the space station, after software and other problems fouled a

2019 test flight and prevented a redo last summer.

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