

# Axiom Space astronauts depart space station for 2-day ride home to Florida

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The first human spaceflight of the year is headed home as the four crew of the Axiom Space Ax-3 mission climbed aboard the SpaceX Crew Dragon Freedom and departed the International Space Station on

Wednesday heading for a planned Friday morning splashdown off Florida's coast.

The [astronauts](#) spent nearly 18 days docked to the ISS after launching from KSC on Jan. 18 and arriving two days later. On board are Axiom chief astronaut and [mission](#) commander Michael López-Alegría along with Italian Air Force Col. Walter Villadei, Alper Gezeravcı of Turkey, and European Space Agency project astronaut Marcus Wandt of Sweden.

Departing the ISS at 9:20 a.m. EST, they now have a nearly 48-hour ride home set to splash down in one of seven locations in either the Gulf of Mexico or Atlantic Ocean that have yet to be announced.

"We hope you guys had a wonderful time on the station," said SpaceX mission control on departure. "We're looking forward to seeing your smiling faces in person."

López-Alegría is a former NASA astronaut completing his sixth trip to space and became the first person making a repeat ride on SpaceX's Dragon, having also commanded Axiom's first private mission to the ISS in 2022.

"To our gracious, endearing hosts of Expedition 70 ... Thank you for all you did for us. We couldn't have done it without you," he said, adding a comment directed toward NASA astronauts Jasmin Moghbeli and Loral O'Hara. "There's some peanut butter waiting for you in the airlock entrance on the forward side. Enjoy."

The departure brings the ISS population down from 11 back to seven, made up of the four members of Crew-7 who arrived at the ISS last August and three crew who flew up on a Russian Soyuz.

This marks the 12th human spaceflight of Crew Dragon for SpaceX among its fleet of four capsules bringing 45 different passengers to space—46 if you include López-Alegría's two flights. Their ride is the newest of the four spacecraft, Crew Dragon Freedom, which flew for the first time in 2022 on the Crew-4 flight, followed by Axiom Space's second trip to the ISS, Ax-2 in 2023.

SpaceX has as many as four more flights planned in 2024, with Crew-8 set to launch next as early as Feb. 22 from KSC's Launch Pad 39-A.

Houston-based Axiom Space is the only private company that has been awarded the rights to visit the ISS and has its fourth mission set for as early as October. The missions are a precursor to its plans to send up its own modules to attach to the ISS beginning in 2026, which will eventually split off to become the freestanding Axiom Station.

Each of the private flights has featured a former NASA astronaut-turned-Axiom employee commanding the mission along with three private customers. The first trip featured three men who paid Axiom Space \$55 million each for the trip, but starting with Ax-2, the company steered toward its new baseline of carting up primarily astronauts for paying governments.

Ax-2 featured two astronauts from Saudi Arabia, while this mission brought up astronauts from Italy, Turkey, and Sweden. ESA astronaut Wandt marks the first time Axiom has flown a customer that already had traditional access to the ISS as the ESA is one of the space station's partners along with the U.S., Russia, Japan, and Canada, but available time even for partners nations can be limited.

The quartet was supposed to depart the station and land on Saturday, but bad weather around Florida forced a series of delays so that the Ax-3 mission would be stretched an extra 5 1/2 days.

The crew held a departing ceremony on Friday with the seven remaining astronauts and cosmonauts of Expedition 70.

"Well, as they say, all good things must come to an end, and it's time to bid farewell," said Expedition 70 commander and ESA astronaut Andreas Mogensen of Denmark. "We want to congratulate them on a busy and successful mission. ... You guys have been great crewmates."

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