

NASA astronauts will stay at the space station longer for more troubleshooting of Boeing capsule

June 29 2024, by Adithi Ramakrishnan



This photo provided by NASA shows the Starliner spacecraft docked to the Harmony module of the International Space Station, orbiting 262 miles above Egypt's Mediterranean coast, on June 13, 2024. Credit: NASA via AP

Two [NASA astronauts](#) will stay longer at the International Space Station as engineers troubleshoot problems on [Boeing's new space capsule](#) that cropped up on the trip there.

NASA on Friday did not set a return date until testing on the ground was complete and said the astronauts were safe.

"We're not in any rush to come home," said NASA's commercial crew program manager Steve Stich.

Veteran NASA test pilots Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams [blasted off aboard Boeing's Starliner capsule](#) for the orbiting laboratory on June 5. It was the first astronaut launch for Boeing after years of delays and setbacks.

The [test flight](#) was expected to last a week or so, enough time for Wilmore and Williams to check out the capsule while docked at the station. But [problems with the capsule's propulsion system](#), used to maneuver the spacecraft, prompted NASA and Boeing to delay the flight home several times while they analyzed the trouble.

They also wanted to avoid conflicting with spacewalks by station astronauts. But a spacewalk this week was canceled after water leaked from an astronaut's spacesuit. The issue hasn't been resolved and the planned spacewalk next week was postponed.

As Starliner closed in on the space station a day after launch, last-minute thruster failures almost derailed the docking. Five of the capsule's 28 thrusters went down during docking; all but one thruster was restarted.



In this photo provided by NASA, Boeing Crew Flight Test astronauts Suni Williams and Butch Wilmore, center, pose with Expedition 71 Flight Engineers Mike Barratt, left, and Tracy Dyson, both NASA astronauts, in their spacesuits aboard the International Space Station's Quest airlock on June 24, 2024. Credit: NASA via AP

Starliner already had one small helium leak when it rocketed into orbit and several more leaks sprung up during the flight. Helium is used to pressurize fuel for the thrusters. Boeing said this week that the two problems aren't a concern for the return trip.

In delaying the astronauts' return, NASA and Boeing said they needed more time to collect information about the [thruster](#) trouble and leaks while the capsule was docked. Both are in the [service module](#), a unit

attached to the capsule that burns up during reentry.

NASA initially said the Starliner could stay docked at the space station for up to 45 days due to battery limits. But in-flight tests have shown that limit can be extended, Stich said.

Officials said they won't set a return date while they do ground tests of [capsule](#) thrusters in the New Mexico desert, which were expected to last a couple of weeks. They want to try to replicate the situation that occurred during docking.

"I want to make it very clear that Butch and Suni are not stranded in space," said Stich, adding that Starliner is designed for a mission of up to 210 days.



In this photo provided by NASA, Boeing Crew Flight Test astronauts Butch Wilmore, left, and Suni Williams pose for a portrait inside the vestibule between the forward port on the International Space Station's Harmony module and Boeing's Starliner spacecraft on June 13, 2024. Credit: NASA via AP

Stich said the astronauts could return to Earth in Starliner in the case of a space station emergency.

After the space shuttle fleet retired, NASA turned over astronaut rides to private companies. Elon Musk's SpaceX has made nine taxi flights for NASA since 2020. NASA plans to alternate between SpaceX and Boeing in ferrying crews to and from the space station.

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