

Japan astronaut to try flying carpet in space lab: official

5 March 2009



File photo shows astronauts working on The International Space Station's Japanese Kibo module. A Japanese astronaut going to space this month will try to fly on a carpet, use eyedrops in zero gravity and meet a series of other off-beat challenges, a space agency official said Thursday. Wakata will try "a magic carpet that floats in the air" after he reaches the laboratory Kibo.

A Japanese astronaut going to space this month will try to fly on a carpet, use eyedrops in zero gravity and meet a series of other off-beat challenges, a space agency official said Thursday.

Koichi Wakata will perform 16 tasks chosen from 1,597 suggested by hundreds of people, from nursery school pupils to a 90-year-old man, said the official at the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA).

Wakata will try "a magic carpet that floats in the air" after he reaches the Japanese laboratory Kibo (Hope) at the International Space Station (ISS) later in March for a stay of more than three months, said a JAXA report.

"It is a fantasy on earth but can humans fly in space?" it asked.

Wakata will also attempt to fold clothes, do push-ups and backflips, arm-wrestle another astronaut and "shoot liquid out of the straw of a drink container to see what happens", said the space agency.

JAXA said it would release footage of the experiments to Japanese media.

Wakata, a 45-year-old former Japan Airlines engineer, joined previous NASA space shuttle missions in 1996 and 2000.

On his first space trip he and a fellow astronaut became the first to play the board game Go in space, using a special set.

In another initiative, the Japanese space agency has invited companies to rent an astronaut by the hour in the ISS space lab to perform desired tasks, which could include advertisements or science experiments.

The hourly charge for an astronaut is 5.5 million yen (55,000 dollars) -- plus an extra fee to transport any required items into space of 3.3 million yen per kilogramme (1.5 million yen per pound).

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APA citation: Japan astronaut to try flying carpet in space lab: official (2009, March 5) retrieved 27 October 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-japan-astronaut-carpet-space-lab.html>

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