

ISS crew lands in Kazakhstan after more than 200 days

17/04/2020 17:33 by admin

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In this photo released by Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre (GCTC), Roscosmos space agency U.S. astronauts Andrew Morgan, left, Jessica Meir, right, and Russian cosmonaut Oleg Skripochka sit in the capsule shortly after the landing of the Russian Soyuz MS-15 space capsule near Kazakh town of Dzhezkazgan, Kazakhstan. (AP)

Moscow: A US-Russian space crew landed safely Friday in the steppes of Kazakhstan, greeted with extra precautions amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Following a stint on the International Space Station, NASA astronauts Jessica Meir and Andrew Morgan and Russian Oleg Skripochka touched down as scheduled at 11:16 am Friday. Their Soyuz landing capsule landed under a striped orange-and-white parachute about 150 kilometers (93 miles) southeast of Dzhezkazgan in central Kazakhstan.

Russian officials said they took stringent measures to protect the crew amid the pandemic. The recovery team and medical personnel assigned to help the crew out of the capsule and for post-flight checks had been under close medical observation for nearly a month, including tests for the coronavirus.

The space crew smiled as they talked to medical experts wearing masks. Following a quick checkup, the crew will be flown by helicopters to Baikonur, from where Skripochka will be taken to Moscow, said Vyacheslav Rogozhnikov, a Russian medical official who oversaw the crew's return.

Morgan and Meir will have to be driven from Baikonur to Kyzyl-Orda, 300 kilometers (190 miles) away, to board a flight to the U.S. a strenuous journey made necessary by Kazakhstan's quarantine measures.

On Thursday, the Russian government coronavirus headquarters reported the first contagion at the Star City, which serves as the main hub for pre-flight training of U.S., Russian and other international crew members of the International Space Station. The Star City also has residential quarters for cosmonauts and support staff.

Roscosmos Director Dmitry Rogozin said Wednesday that the Russian space corporation had 30 coronavirus cases.

The crew returned to Earth exactly 50 years after the Apollo 13 astronauts splashed down in the Pacific after an oxygen tank explosion aborted the moon-landing mission.

Morgan wrapped up a 272-day mission on his first flight into space. He conducted seven space walks, four of which were to improve and extend the life of the station's Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer, which looks for evidence of dark matter in the universe.

Meir and Skripochka spent 205 days in space, with Meir carrying out the first three all-women spacewalks with her crewmate Christina Koch, who returned from space in February.

Speaking from the orbiting outpost before the return to Earth, the crew said that coming back to the world drastically

changed by the pandemic will be challenging.

Morgan said the crew has tried to keep atop the coronavirus news, but added that itâ€™s hard to comprehend whatâ€™s really going on. â€œIt is quite surreal for us to see this whole situation unfolding on the planet belowâ€•, said Meir. â€œWe can tell you that the Earth still looks just as stunning as always from up here, so itâ€™s difficult to believe all the changes that have taken place since both of us have been up here.â€•

A new crew comprising NASAâ€™s Chris Cassidy and Russians Anatoly Ivanishin and Ivan Vagner arrived at the station on April 9.

They said before blastoff that they had been under a very strict quarantine for a month before the flight and were feeling good.

- AP