

Beat: News

3 astronauts return to Earth after 6 months in space

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USPA News - Three crew members from the United States, Russia and Japan landed safely aboard the Soyuz spacecraft in the central steppe of Kazakhstan on early Wednesday morning, wrapping up a half-year-long mission aboard the International Space Station (ISS), officials said. The spacecraft undocked from the ISS at 2236 GMT on Tuesday and landed southeast of Dzhezkazgan, a city in Kazakhstan's Karagandy province, at 7:58 a.m. local time (0158GMT) on Wednesday.

The Soyuz TMA-11M spacecraft was carrying Japanese commander Koichi Wakata, American flight engineer Rick Mastracchio, and Russian commander Mikhail Tyurin. The trio had arrived at the ISS on November 7, carrying with them the Olympic torch that was later used to light the Olympic flame for the start of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi. Their work aboard the station included a variety of research, including human health management for long-duration space travel in preparation of a mission for two crew members to spend a full year aboard the space station in 2015. During his time on the orbiting complex, Mastracchio ventured outside the confines of the space station for three contingency spacewalks. The first two were to remove and replace a faulty cooling pump, and the third was to remove and replace a failed backup computer relay box. For Japan, the mission marked the first time that a Japanese astronaut led on-board operations and utilization activities of the ISS program. "Wakata's achievement as the ISS Commander is engraved as the beginning of a new chapter in Japan's human exploration," said Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) President Naoki Okumura. Okumura said he hoped the mission's success will eventually lead to a second Japanese astronaut becoming ISS Commander. "The ISS has been the largest arena of international cooperation on record, and will be widely utilized as an essential 'foothold' toward human exploration beyond the low Earth orbit," he said. During their mission, the three crew members spent a total of 188 days in space, during which they orbited Earth more than 3,000 times and traveled almost 79.8 million miles (128 million kilometers). "All three crew members are safe and adjusting to gravity," NASA said after Wednesday's landing. After the Soyuz spacecraft separated from the ISS on late Tuesday, American astronaut Steve Swanson of Expedition 40 took command of the orbiting laboratory. Swanson and his crewmates, Russian flight engineers Oleg Artemyev and Alexander Skvortsov, will tend to the station as a three-person crew until the arrival of three new crew members later this month.

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