

Russia may soon decommission the world's most historic launch pad

Enlarge / A Soyuz rocket launches from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in 2012.

reader comments

57 with 34 posters participating

Share this story

Site no. 1 in dusty Baikonur, Kazakhstan, is where it all began. In October 1957, an R-7 missile launched the first satellite, Sputnik, into space. Less than four years later, Yuri Gagarin reached orbit from this launch pad, and the first woman, Valentina Tereshkova, followed two years later.

Even today, all Russian, American, Canadian, European, and Japanese astronauts launch into space from Site no. 1—which is also known as Gagarin's Start—as it has been reconfigured for launches of the Soyuz FG rocket. But soon, that will change.

Russia has already moved its Progress cargo launches to the new Soyuz 2 rocket, and now, according to reports in that country, it will move crew launches as well to the newer rocket. In its most powerful configuration, the Soyuz 2.1b has a payload capacity of 8.2 tons to low-Earth orbit, in comparison to 6.9 tons with the Soyuz FG booster.

RIA Novosti reports that the crewed launches of the Soyuz MS-13 and Soyuz MS-15 spacecraft, in July and September, will be the final flights of the Soyuz FG vehicle. After this

point, Gagarin's Start will be decommissioned because there are no funds to upgrade it for launches of the Soyuz 2 rocket.

Presently, the Soyuz 2 rocket launches from another location at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Site 31, as well as two other launch facilities in Russia and Europe's Guiana Space Center in French Guiana. Future crew launches of the Soyuz rocket and spacecraft will take place from Site 31 in Baikonur.

In truth, the Baikonur Cosmodrome is a rather desolate place to launch from. The nearest major city to Baikonur, Tashkent, is more than 800km away. The name Baikonur, ironically, means "rich soil." This was true for the original Baikonur town in Kazakhstan, which is located hundreds of kilometers to the north. But as they sought to deceive the Americans during the Cold War, the Soviets built a fake launch site at the original Baikonur, while building the actual cosmodrome in the desert, near the Syr Darya river, which is sunny 300 days a year.

Even today, reaching the launch pad from the crew quarters, located outside the cosmodrome perimeter, requires a jolting 20- to 30-minute drive across bad roads through a desert steppe. The road to space, for now at least, goes through some of the most forbidding terrain on Earth.

<https://arstechnica.com/?p=1494695>