Three astronauts are launching to space tomorrow after lengthy quarantine

In the wee hours of the morning on April 9th, three astronauts are set to launch on a Russian Soyuz rocket from Kazakhstan and journey to the International Space Station, where they'll join three crew members already living and working in orbit. Because this flight is launching during a pandemic, tighter restrictions and protocols are in place to prevent the novel coronavirus from making its way to space.

The three people headed to orbit tomorrow include NASA astronaut Chris Cassidy and Russian cosmonauts Anatoly Ivanishin and Ivan Vagner. Ivanishin and Vagner are last-minute replacements to the flight after one of the original cosmonauts assigned to the mission suffered an eye injury. For Cassidy and Ivanishin, this will be their third trip to orbit, while it will be the first for Vagner. The crew will stay on the ISS for a total of six months.

Final preparations for a trip to the space station from Russia usually begin in Star City — a small town just outside of Moscow. After a brief stay, the crew then heads to Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, where their rocket launches, and enters a two-week quarantine period. Even before the pandemic, NASA and Russia's state space corporation, Roscosmos, required crews to enter a two-week quarantine ahead of their launch date, to ensure the travelers don't inadvertently carry a nasty bug to space.

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However, quarantine procedures accelerated slightly while the crews were still in Star City. Around the time of Cassidy's arrival at the beginning of March, stricter travel restrictions and social distancing measures were enacted all over the world to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

"Had I been in normal quarantine, I probably could have gone out to some restaurants and left the immediate parameters of the Star City area and just been smart about where we went," Cassidy said during a round of press interviews on March 19th. "But not this time. We've been sort of isolated to our cottages and just the essential place to go to get food."

Pavel Vlasov, head of the Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center (GCTC) in Star City, confirmed that the crews started quarantining earlier than usual. "They do not go on any trips even the traditional like visiting the Kremlin wall and [Sergei] Korolev's house before setting off to Baikonur," Vlasov said in a statement on the Roscosmos website.

Cassidy has since traveled to Baikonur Cosmodrome and gone through the regular quarantine procedures. NASA maintains that its employees have been following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendations for controlling infections ahead of quarantine, "such as cleaning of surfaces, social distancing, emphasizing hand hygiene, encouraging NASA team members who are sick to stay home and limiting contact with crew members," according to a NASA spokesperson. Meanwhile, Cassidy and his crewmates have stayed relatively isolated in their hotel, prepping for the mission, exercising, and even playing ping-pong. "Ironically, the timing of our entering the strict quarantine protocol somewhat magically lined up with the world caving in, in terms of quarantine protocol," Cassidy said.

But come launch day, the sights and sounds leading up to the mission will be much quieter than usual. Roscosmos has banned all media from covering the launch in person, and there will

be fewer people on site to cheer the astronauts as they head to the rocket. “Normally as you come walking out of the hotel… there’s music playing and there’s crowds of people lining the walkway as we proceed from the hotel to the buses, and it’s very, very motivating. It’s super exciting,” Cassidy said. But those celebrations will be absent this time around. “It’ll be completely quiet. There won’t be anybody there. We’ll just kind of walk out. Maybe we’ll still play the music and fire the three of us up ourselves. But who knows?”

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None of Cassidy’s family or friends can be at the launch due to travel restrictions. His wife was able to be with him while in Star City, and she had planned to attend the launch. But after Russia restricted foreign travel on March 16th, her itinerary changed. Ultimately, she went home when he headed to Baikonur Cosmodrome. “We thought we would say goodbye on launch day,” Cassidy said.

Despite everything, Cassidy is feeling good ahead of launch. He even shared a rap his friend made on Instagram about how to stay at home to fight COVID-19. He hopes that all of the extra precautions were enough to prevent COVID-19’s spread to space. “I really haven’t been around anybody else, so it’d be really, really strange if I did contract something,” Cassidy said on March 19th. “Anything can happen between now and April 9th, but we’re being really super vigilant so that I can remain healthy to get to the station.”

While on board the ISS, the crew will conduct science experiments and maybe even go on some spacewalks down the line. If all goes according to plan, this crew will likely be an audience to this summer’s most anticipated spaceflight event: the arrival of the first crewed flight of SpaceX’s Crew Dragon. The vehicle, developed as part of NASA’s Commercial Crew Program, is slated to take off this May, carrying NASA astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken to the space station.

But while there’s plenty to look forward to in space, Cassidy said his mind won’t stray far from what’s happening on the Earth below.

“I’ll have a full plate and my mind will be engaged, but I’m still going to be talking, communicating, emailing with my family and loved ones and friends,” Cassidy said. “I certainly am not going to be disengaged from it thinking it’s not my problem. It’s certainly my problem, because my family is living it and my friends and my co-workers are living it in real time.”

Takeoff for the mission is slated for 4:05AM ET on April 9th. After launch, the crew will make four orbits around Earth and arrive at the International Space Station six hours later. NASA’s coverage of the launch will begin at 3AM ET, and coverage of docking will begin at 9:30AM ET.

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