

Mars500: Would you go?

As you are reading this, six 'astronauts' are sitting inside a 'spacecraft' on their way to Mars. It's not a real journey. The men are taking part in a project to simulate a mission to Mars. The project started just before 11.00 on Thursday 3 June when the six volunteers entered the craft at a medical institute in Moscow. It was the beginning of an 18-month experiment called 'Mars500'.

Scientists say the study will help them understand what happens when astronauts go on a long journey to another planet. The ship's 'crew' consists of three Russian 'astronauts', one French, one Chinese and one Colombian-born Italian. Before entering the craft they gave a press conference. They agreed it was a 'difficult' mission and that they'd miss things like the sun and fresh air but they wanted to do it because it was a good thing 'for science and for all of humankind'.

The special craft consists of several spaces for living and working on the journey. There's also a separate room with sand and rocks. When the astronauts reach Mars, three of them will walk into the room, imagining they are on the surface of Mars.

There are no windows in the craft and the only contact the astronauts have with the outside world is by email. To make things more real, each time they send a message there's a 20-minute time delay to reflect the real time delay when sending messages between Mars and Earth.

While they are on their journey, the crew must complete different tasks. But they can also relax in the craft's gym, read books, watch DVDs and play video games. One member of the crew took his guitar with him 'to annoy the other guys'.

According to the project leaders, the astronauts are free to leave the experiment at any time but hopefully they'll all still be there when the craft returns to Earth in November 2011. But will they still be friends after spending 520 days together in a small space with no natural light? We'll see ...

For years we have dreamed of going to Mars but a real journey won't be possible for many years. The project organisers predict that a real mission could take place soon after 2050. As one of the volunteers said before entering the craft, 'When the very first human steps on Mars, I will be able to say, "yeah, I helped do that".'

1 Use vowels (*a, e, i, o, u*) to complete the names of the planets.

- 1 _ _ r t h
- 2 J _ p _ t _ r
- 3 M _ r s
- 4 M _ r c _ r y
- 5 N _ p t _ n _
- 6 S _ t _ r n
- 7 _ r _ n _ s
- 8 V _ n _ s

2 Put the planets in order from the nearest to the furthest from the sun.

3 Answer the questions.

- 1 Which planet takes its name from the Roman god of war? _____
- 2 Which is the only planet known to have life? _____
- 3 Which planet is famous for its rings? _____
- 4 Which is the largest planet? _____

4 Read the article and find the answers to these questions.

- 1 How many people are taking part in the experiment? _____
- 2 Why did they volunteer? _____
- 3 What are they going to do while they're on the mission Mars. _____

5 Decide if these sentences *true* or *false*. Correct the false sentences.

- 1 Mars500 is the name of a real mission to Mars. _____
- 2 The people taking part in the experiment are from different countries. _____
- 3 When they send an email, it takes 20 minutes to arrive. _____
- 4 They gave a press conference from inside the spacecraft. _____
- 5 All of them will walk on an imaginary planet Mars. _____
- 6 They can't leave the experiment for 18 months. _____

6 Choose the correct verb and put it in the right tense.

give relax sit start take part walk

- 1 As you are reading this, six 'astronauts' _____ inside a 'spacecraft'
- 2 The men _____ in a project to simulate a mission to Mars.
- 3 The project _____ just before 11.00 on Thursday 3 June.
- 4 Before entering the craft they _____ a press conference.
- 5 When the astronauts reach Mars, three of them _____ into the room,
- 6 They can also _____ in the craft's gym.

7 Answer the questions in your own words.

- 1 Do you think Mars500 is a useful experiment?
- 2 Do you think the six volunteers will stay to the end of the experiment?
- 3 Will the volunteers still be friends after spending 520 days together?
- 4 Will we ever send astronauts on a real manned mission to Mars?

8 Would you like to go to Mars on a real mission? Make a list of the reasons *for* and *against* going to Mars.

Reasons for going:

Reasons for not going:

Glossary

annoy (*verb*) – to make someone feel angry

astronaut (*noun*) – someone who travels in space

crew (*noun*) – the people who work on a ship or aircraft

humankind (*noun*) – people in general

natural (light) (*adjective*) – light from the sun

simulate (*verb*) – to produce something in a way that seems real but is not

spacecraft (*noun*) – a vehicle that can travel in space

volunteer (*noun*) – someone who is not paid for their work