

3 Astronauts Blast Off for Holiday in Space

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A Soyuz spacecraft lifting off Wednesday from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

BAIKONUR, Kazakhstan — A Soyuz spacecraft carrying a Russian, an American and a Canadian blasted off Wednesday for the International Space Station, where the astronauts are to spend half a year in orbit.

The Russian-built Soyuz TMA-07M roared off on schedule from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

"The crew are now safely in orbit. Congratulations," said the television station of U.S. space agency NASA, which broadcast the launch.

On the crew's two-day trip to the space station, Canadian Chris Hadfield is joined by U.S. astronaut Tom Mashburn and cosmonaut Roman Romanenko. They will join U.S. astronaut Kevin Ford and Russians Oleg Novitsky and Yevgeny Tarelkin, who have been manning

the \$100 billion, 15-nation research complex since October.

A brightly colored toy clown from a popular Soviet-era TV show for children, serving as an indicator of weightlessness, started floating in the cabin when the spacecraft reached its preliminary orbit nine minutes into the flight.

"We are feeling well," the three-nation crew told mission control outside Moscow.

When Ford, Novitsky and Tarelkin complete their mission in March, Hadfield will become the first Canadian to command the space station.

About four hours before the launch, the astronauts posed for photos, ran final suit checks and chatted with relatives through protective glass designed to protect them from infection.

Romanenko was seen off by his father, Yury, who set a record for time spent in space during a mission in the 1970s.

"My dad carried out a spaceflight in a two-person crew ... on a similarly cold day 35 years ago, and that was one of the first long-term flights," Romanenko said at a news conference on the eve of the launch.

Typically, the crew performs a final outdoor salute to top space officials before mounting the bus taking them to the Soyuz, but the practice was forgone on this occasion because of the severe cold. The temperature at launch time was minus 17 degrees Celsius.

Before the astronauts were tightly packed into the cramped capsule, they exchanged greetings with Federal Space Agency chief Vladimir Popovkin.

Hadfield said he will play a Canadian-made guitar in space. Romanenko took a mouth organ into orbit to support the "space band" led by the Canadian.

Romanenko's father, who flew into space three times, played a guitar in space when he manned the Soviet-built Mir orbital complex for more than 10 months.

The docking, the 150th trip by Soyuz craft to the space station, is set for Dec. 21, the date interpreted by different groups as the end of days because it marks the end of an age in the 5,125-year-old Maya calendar.

"If, despite all the arguments provided by scientists, this apocalypse still takes place, the ISS crew will be the only surviving earthlings," the Federal Space Agency said in a statement.

"Fortunately, that is just a fantasy."

Shortly after the docking, the six-man crew will celebrate several winter holidays in orbit: Christmas, New Year's Day and then Orthodox Christmas.

"There are certain times of the year and certain times in life that are special by everybody's traditions," Hadfield said before liftoff. "In my family's tradition, this is maybe the most special time of the year."

But the holidays will be followed by hard work, which for the incoming crew will include

the unloading of several cargo ships due to arrive at the station, two spacewalks and about 150 scientific experiments.

Although space travel has long fascinated the general public, interest has flagged in recent decades, as tightened budgets have constrained ambitions.

Hadfield displayed optimism about the future of the industry and said the voyages to the moon, which last happened 40 years ago, set an important precedent.

"What we are doing today as a group is continuing through that door and learning the things we need to do and taking one small step at a time so that we can better understand where we are in the universe," he said. (*AP, Reuters*)

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