

3 Astronauts Land in 'Scene From North Pole'

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A search-and-rescue helicopter preparing to land near a Soyuz capsule in northern Kazakhstan on Wednesday. **Dmitry Kostyukov**

ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Three astronauts landed safely Wednesday in the snowy expanses of central Kazakhstan after spending five months on the International Space Station.

The Soyuz capsule carrying two Russians — Alexander Kaleri and Oleg Skripochka — and American Scott Kelly landed at 1:53 p.m. about 50 kilometers from the northern Kazakh city of Arkalyk.

The capsule came back to harsh conditions, including a stiff wind that blew it on its side and rolled it 22 meters from its touchdown point through fresh snow.

Rob Navias, a NASA spokesman on the scene, described conditions as "like a scene from the North Pole."

The space travelers were bundled into blankets after being pulled from the capsule and then

placed in reclining stretchers as they slowly acclimated to the planet's gravity after months of weightlessness.

The capsule landed about 3 1/2 hours after undocking from the ISS. After hurtling through space, it deployed a parachute about 15 minutes before touchdown, slowing its speed from 800 kilometers per hour to about 290 kilometers per hour.

A second parachute slowed its descent to 25 kilometers per hour. Then with the ground just a few meters away, six engines on the capsule's bottom were fired, bringing it to a gentle landing in a powdery cloud of fresh snow.

The first out was Kaleri, who has now spent a total of 770 days in space over five flights, making him the second most experienced space flier in history after compatriot Sergei Krikalyov. Navias said Kaleri smiled and winked at him as he was lifted out.

Skripochka and Kelly also appeared to be in good shape.

"Scott Kelly is looking remarkably well," Navias said.

In a break with usual practice, search-and-recovery personnel dispensed with the ritual of taking the returning astronauts to inflatable medical tents for a checkup and instead loaded them directly onto all-terrain vehicles.

"The search and recovery team have decided it's too cold, it's too wintery, it's too Arctic out here in terms of the overall conditions," Navias said.

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