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Russian-U.S. Space Trio Return to Earth After 6 Months at ISS

By The Moscow Times

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Russia's space agency ground personnel check the Soyuz TMA-14M capsule shortly after its landing, southeast of the town of Zhezkazgan in central Kazakhstan.

Two Russian cosmonauts and a NASA astronaut landed safely in a snow-covered Kazakh steppe on Thursday after a 167-day mission aboard the International Space Station (ISS).

See the Photo Gallery: Russian Cosmonauts Return to Earth From ISS

A capsule carrying NASA station commander Barry "Butch" Wilmore and Russian flight engineers Alexander Samokutyaev and Elena Serova landed in a vertical upright position shortly after sunrise at 0807 (0207 GMT), some 147 kilometers southeast of the town of Zhezkazgan in central Kazakhstan.

"Everything is going on by the book," said a NASA television commentator. "Expedition 42 is back on Earth."

Extracted from the capsule, which was charred on re-entry, the three were seated in semi-reclined chairs for a breath of fresh air and first medical checks, bundled up in blankets to protect them from frigid temperatures.

"Everything is great, thank you. The guys are great and worked very well," said a smiling Serova while a female doctor measured her pulse and blood pressure.

"Congratulations on the recent holiday," a rescue and recovery team officer said to Serova, referring to the International Women's Day marked on March 8.

Serova made her first space flight and became the first Russian woman to serve on the ISS, a $100 billion project of 15 countries. Wilmore and Samokutyaev completed their second flights.

"Everything is fine. I am drinking real tea with lemon," Samokutyaev said with a smile.

"I am glad to be here," Wilmore said in Russian before the three got into all-terrain vehicles and were taken to individual helicopters to be evacuated from the landing area.

NASA astronaut Terry Virts, who took over command of the station from Wilmore on Tuesday, remains aboard with cosmonaut Anton Shkaplerov and Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti. They are due home in mid-May.

Wilmore partnered with Virts for a trio of spacewalks between Feb. 21 and March 1 to prepare parking spots for two new commercial space taxis hired by NASA to begin ferrying crew members to and from the station in 2017.

NASA expects future crews to make four more spacewalks before the end of the year to install docking ports and other equipment for the new spaceships.

With the arrival of the next crew, NASA and Russia will be doubling the mission durations in an attempt to learn more about how the human body responds to even longer stays in space.

NASA astronaut Mark Kelly and Russia's Mikhail Kornienko are due to spend a year aboard the station, which flies about 418 kilometers above Earth. They are slated to launch, along with cosmonaut Gennady Padalka, on March 27 from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

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