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2 Cosmonauts Go for First Space Ride

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Samokutyayev showing a toy Sunday that will be hung in the Soyuz to indicate when weightlessness is reached. **Shamil Zhumatov**

BAIKONUR, Kazakhstan — Two cosmonauts making their first flights into space said they are counting on their U.S. crewmate when the three blast off together for the International Space Station.

American Ron Garan logged 13 days in space on a space shuttle mission in 2008, which makes him the most experienced member of the crew. At 49 he is also the oldest.

Garan and cosmonauts Andrei Borisenko, 46, and Alexander Samokutyayev, 40, were to ride into space on a Soyuz launched early Tuesday from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. They are expected to reach the orbiting station two days later.

"We've got Ron who's got this experience, and he promised to help us with some issues and the feelings that we might encounter and that cannot be modeled on earth," Samokutyayev told reporters Sunday.

The launch is just a week shy of the 50th anniversary of Yury Gagarin's historic journey

into space as the first human in space. Tuesday's launch is from the same launch pad.

This mission's Soyuz TMA-21 was named after Gagarin and carries his portrait — a rare thing for Russian spacecraft, which are normally austere in their design, carrying nothing but the ship's name and number.

In line with a now 50-year tradition, the crew last week visited the cabin where Gagarin spent his last night before his flight.

Garan said he got "a little bit of chills" when he visited the cabin, where all the furniture and even Gagarin's personal belongings have been kept intact.

The U.S. astronaut emphasized how much has changed since Gagarin's flight in 1961 during the space race between the two Cold War superpowers.

"Fifty years ago, one nation launched one man, basically as a competition," he said. "Today, the three of us represent the many nations of the international partnership that makes up the International Space Station."

Sergei Krikalyov, who heads the Cosmonauts Training Center, acknowledged feeling "a little nervous" about the two Russians having no space flight experience.

"We've been trying to send an experienced cosmonaut and an inexperienced one at the same time, but we're now having more flights and we're running out of cosmonauts," he said. "We need to give younger people a chance to fly."

Krikalyov, who holds the record for time in space of 803 days, noted that the current three-man crew would be on their own only during the two-day flight to the International Space Station. Once there, they will join Russia's Dmitry Kondratyev, American Catherine Coleman and Italy's Paolo Nespoli.

Garan, who has posted Twitter messages almost every day during his stay at Baikonur, promised to keep up the habit in space. In Sunday's tweet, he posted a photo of himself getting a haircut, which he said was going to have to last the six months he will be away from home.

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