



Welcome back Alexander! – German ESA astronaut back on Earth

10 November 2014

German ESA astronaut Alexander Gerst is back on Earth after spending five and a half months in space. The 38-year-old geophysicist and flight engineer landed in the steppes of Kazakhstan roughly 100 kilometres from the city of Arkalyk at 04:58 CET (09:58 local time) on 10 November 2014 after a three and a half hour return journey on board a Russian Soyuz spacecraft. Gerst flew on ISS expeditions 40 and 41 with his two crew colleagues, cosmonaut Maxim Surayev and NASA astronaut Reid Wiseman. The trio set off for the International Space Station (ISS) from the Russian spaceport at Baikonur in Kazakhstan on 28 May 2014. Gerst is the first German astronaut who will return to Germany immediately after his time in space to be examined in :envihab at the German Aerospace Center (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR), one of the world's most modern aerospace medical research facilities.

"The safe landing of the Soyuz capsule has brought Alexander Gerst's Blue Dot mission to a successful conclusion. Mission accomplished!" said Johann-Dietrich Wörner, Chairman of the DLR Executive Board. "I am particularly pleased about the roughly 100 experiments that Alex Gerst took part in, 25 of which originated from Germany. His flight has shown that in human spaceflight and especially its utilisation, Germany plays a leading role worldwide," said Wörner.

Volker Schmid, DLR Manager for the Blue Dot mission, also speaks of a 'mammoth programme' that Alexander Gerst, who holds a doctorate degree in volcanology, completed over the 165 days of the Blue Dot mission. "The scientific disciplines extended from fluid physics, material sciences, human physiology and radiation biology to astrophysics and even robotics and technology demonstrations. Moreover, the mission featured two industrial experiments that were started or successfully completed." A highlight of his mission was the over six-hour extravehicular activity (EVA), completed with his colleague Reid Wiseman on 7 October 2014, to conduct important maintenance work on the ISS.

Science and maintenance

Alexander Gerst took off from the spaceport in Baikonur on board Soyuz TMA 13M (ISS AF-39S) on 28 May 2014, docking with the ISS 'Rassvet' module in the Russian section of the Space Station six hours later. Gerst was the first German in space since 2008 and, after Thomas Reiter (2006), the second to live and work almost six months on board the ISS. In addition to routine scientific work, the youngest German astronaut, the 11th in total, performed maintenance and was responsible for supervising the arrival of supply vehicles, among them the final European space freighter, ATV-5 Georges Lemaître, which docked with the ISS on 12 August 2014. Among other things, ATV-5 carried the German experiments EML, MagVector, WiseNet and SpaceTex, which Gerst unpacked and installed in the European research laboratory, Columbus.

"Gerst was also trained for the arrival of the US supply spacecraft Dragon and Cygnus. During his mission he used the manipulator arm to dock each of these craft with the Station," reports Schmid. But beyond all this, Alexander Gerst fascinated people around the world with his personal impressions, photos and videos from outer space, which he posted regularly on various social media platforms. 'Live calls' – telephone conversations from outer space – were also part of his remit. On 4 September 2014, Alex Gerst spoke with roughly 5000 enthusiastic listeners in his hometown of Künzelsau in the Baden-Württemberg region of Germany.

Daily coordination with the Columbus Control Centre

There is a continuous connection between the astronauts and the teams in the ground control centres, a crucial aspect for ensuring smooth completion of work on board the ISS. The primary 'home' ground control centre for Alexander Gerst was the Columbus Mission Control Centre at DLR Oberpfaffenhofen. "Supporting Alex's mission meant putting in well over than 30,000 work hours. Not just at the permanently staffed control room consoles during the mission, but also in the preceding months of preparation and in a whole variety of coordination tasks running behind the scenes," says Columbus Flight Director Thomas Uhlig. "There was immense public interest in the Blue Dot mission. Endless crowds of people passed through the German Space Operations Center during our open day on 12 October 2014," Uhlig reports, adding: "In recent years, we have been able to significantly increase the time astronauts spend conducting scientific experiments. In conducting over 80 hours of science per week, Alexander Gerst and his colleagues are the undisputed record holders."

One of the last tasks that Alexander Gerst with was asked to complete before his departure from the ISS was to install the Electromagnetic Levitator (EML), an innovative furnace, in the European Columbus laboratory and initiate its initial test sequences. Samantha Cristoforetti, an ESA astronaut from Italy, is scheduled to set off for the ISS on 23 November. She will continue the experiments that Alexander Gerst started.

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Alexander Gerst upon his arrival in Cologne on 10 November 2014



The German ESA astronaut Alexander Gerst touched down at Cologne-Bonn airport shortly before 19:00 CET, 14 hours after his landing in the steppe of Kazakhstan. Among those seen here welcoming the 38-year-old is Johann-Dietrich Wörner, Chairman of the DLR Executive Board (second from left), Cologne's Mayor, Jürgen Roters (right), and Thomas Reiter, former astronaut and ESA's Director of Human Spaceflight and Operations (fourth from right). Gerst is the first European astronaut to be flown directly to his home country after returning from space – without, as has otherwise been the case, initially travelling to the United States. Gerst is currently at DLR's :envihab facility in Cologne undergoing the intensive series of medical examinations necessary for astronauts returning from space missions.

Credit: DLR.

Alexander Gerst just a few minutes after landing



The German astronaut Alexander Gerst returned to Earth on 10 November 2014 after 165 days in space. This photograph was taken just a few minutes after landing in the steppe of Kazakhstan.

Credit: ESA-S. Corvaja, 2014.

Farewell ISS – Alexander Gerst waves goodbye



Alexander Gerst waves goodbye from the International Space Station (ISS), late in the evening of 9 September 2014, shortly before the Soyuz spacecraft bringing him back to Earth departed.

Credit: ESA/NASA.

The crew on board Soyuz TMA 13M



The German ESA astronaut Alexander Gerst (left) with his crew colleagues Maxim Surayev (centre) and Reid Wiseman in the Soyuz capsule on the evening of 9 November 2014, shortly before setting off for the return trip to Earth. After 165 days in space, the crew touched down in the steppe of Kazakhstan at 04:58 CET (09:58 local time) on 10 November 2014.

Credit: ESA/NASA.

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