

SAUDI ASTRONAUTS, INCLUDING NATION'S 1ST WOMAN, CATCH PRIVATE FLIGHT TO SPACE STATION

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May 22, 2023 03:51 am | Updated 08:16 am IST - CAPE CANAVERAL

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Commander Peggy Whitson, pilot John Shoffner, and mission specialists Ali Alqarni and Rayyanah Barnawi representing Saudi Arabia pose before the planned Axiom Mission 2 (Ax-2) launch to the International Space Station at Kennedy Space Center, Florida, U.S. May 21, 2023. | Photo Credit: Reuters

Saudi Arabia's first astronauts in decades rocketed toward the International Space Station on a chartered multimillion-dollar flight on May 21.

SpaceX launched the ticket-holding crew, led by a retired NASA astronaut now working for the company that arranged the trip. Also on board: a U.S. businessman who now owns a sports car racing team.

The four should reach the space station in their capsule on May 22 morning; they'll spend just over a week there before returning home with a splashdown off the Florida coast.

Sponsored by the Saudi Arabian government, Rayyanah Barnawi, a stem cell researcher, became the first woman from the kingdom to go to space. She was joined by Ali al-Qarni, a fighter pilot with the Royal Saudi Air Force.

They're the first from their country to ride a rocket since a Saudi prince launched aboard shuttle Discovery in 1985. In a quirk of timing, they'll be greeted at the station by an astronaut from the United Arab Emirates.

"This is a dream come true for everyone," Ms. Barnawi said before the flight. "Just being able to understand that this is possible. If me and Ali can do it, then they can do it, too."

Rounding out the visiting crew: Knoxville, Tennessee's John Shoffner, former driver and owner of a sports car racing team that competes in Europe, and chaperone Peggy Whitson, the station's first female commander who holds the U.S. record for most accumulated time in space: 665 days and counting.

It's the second private flight to the space station organized by Houston-based Axiom Space. The first was last year by three businessmen, with another retired NASA astronaut. The company plans to start adding its own rooms to the station in another few years, eventually removing them

to form a stand-alone outpost available for hire.

Axiom won't say how much Mr. Shoffner and Saudi Arabia are paying for the planned 10-day mission. The company had previously cited a ticket price of \$55 million each.

NASA's latest price list shows per-person, per-day charges of \$2,000 for food and up to \$1,500 for sleeping bags and other gear. Need to get your stuff to the space station in advance? Figure roughly \$10,000 per pound (\$20,000 per kilogram), the same fee for trashing it afterward. Need your items back intact? Double the price.

At least the email and video links are free.

The guests will have access to most of the station as they conduct experiments, photograph Earth and chat with schoolchildren back home, demonstrating how kites fly in space when attached to a fan.

After decades of shunning space tourism, NASA now embraces it with two private missions planned a year. The Russian Space Agency has been doing it, off and on, for decades.

"Our job is to expand what we do in low-Earth orbit across the globe," said NASA's space station program manager Joel Montalbano.

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