

UNMANNED, SOLAR-POWERED US SPACE PLANE BACK AFTER 908 DAYS

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The Boeing-built X-37B Orbital Test Vehicle (OTV) is shown at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida on Saturday, Nov. 12, 2022. The unmanned U.S. military space plane landed early Saturday after spending a record 908 days in orbit for its sixth mission and conducting science experiments. | Photo Credit: AP

An unmanned U.S. military space plane landed early Saturday after spending a record 908 days in orbit for its sixth mission and conducting science experiments.

The solar-powered vehicle, which looks like a miniature space shuttle, landed at NASA's Kennedy Space Center. Its previous mission lasted 780 days.

"Since the X-37B's first launch in 2010, it has shattered records and provided our nation with an unrivaled capability to rapidly test and integrate new space technologies," said Jim Chilton, a senior vice president for Boeing, its developer.

For the first time, the space plane hosted a service module that carried experiments for the Naval Research Laboratory, U.S. Air Force Academy and others. The module separated from the vehicle before de-orbiting to ensure a safe landing.

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Among the experiments was a satellite dubbed the FalconSat-8 that was designed and built by academy cadets in partnership with the Air Force Research Laboratory. It was deployed in October 2021 and still remains in orbit.

Another experiment evaluated the effects of long-duration space exposure on seeds.

"This mission highlights the Space Force's focus on collaboration in space exploration and expanding low-cost access to space for our partners, within and outside of the Department of the Air Force," said Gen. Chance Saltzman, Chief of Space Operations.

The X-37Be has now flown over 1.3 billion miles and spent a total of 3,774 days in space.

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