

Artemis II splashdown boosts moon mission

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Houston: Floating in the Pacific Ocean on Friday, the four astronauts of Nasa's Artemis II mission had achieved more than just a historic return to human spaceflight around the moon.

"From the pages of Jules Verne to a modern-day mission to the moon, a new chapter of the exploration of our celestial neighbour is complete," Rob Navias, who provided Nasa commentary during the re-entry, said after splashdown.

Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, Christina Koch of Nasa and Jeremy Hansen of the Canadian Space Agency were the first people to leave low-Earth orbit since 1972. Their journey captivated space enthusiasts and may have created new ones.

Along the beaches of Central Florida, spectators craned their necks as a giant Nasa rocket roared to space on April 1. "Moon joy" became a catch phrase for the astronauts and mission control.

As their spacecraft slipped into Earth's atmosphere at more than 24,000 miles per hour on Friday, the big three American TV networks — ABC, CBS and NBC — interrupted scheduled programming just as they had during

the Apollo missions. Video of the capsule descending under parachutes also popped on the big screens at a couple of baseball stadiums: the New York Mets' Citi Field in Queens and the Seattle Mariners' T-Mobile Park.

As the astronauts swung around the moon's far side on Monday, they passed through a point 4,06,771km from Earth, surpassing a distance record set by the crew of Apollo 13 in 1970. In all, they travelled 11,26,922km from Florida to the moon to the Pacific Ocean.

Along the way, the Artemis II astronauts studied parts of the lunar far side that human eyes had never seen. (Those regions of the surface were hidden in shadow during the Apollo missions.) They were also wowed by a 53-minute solar eclipse.

Most importantly, the mission demonstrated that their Orion spacecraft can handle transporting human beings to the moon.

That sets up the next steps in the Artemis programme, which aims to put Americans back on the surface of the moon in 2028.

China, which is aiming to put its astronauts on the moon by 2030, is the competitor spurring Nasa and the US. But unlike the lunar contest with the

Soviet Union in the 1960s, the goal for both countries is not just to get to the moon but to establish a continuing presence there.

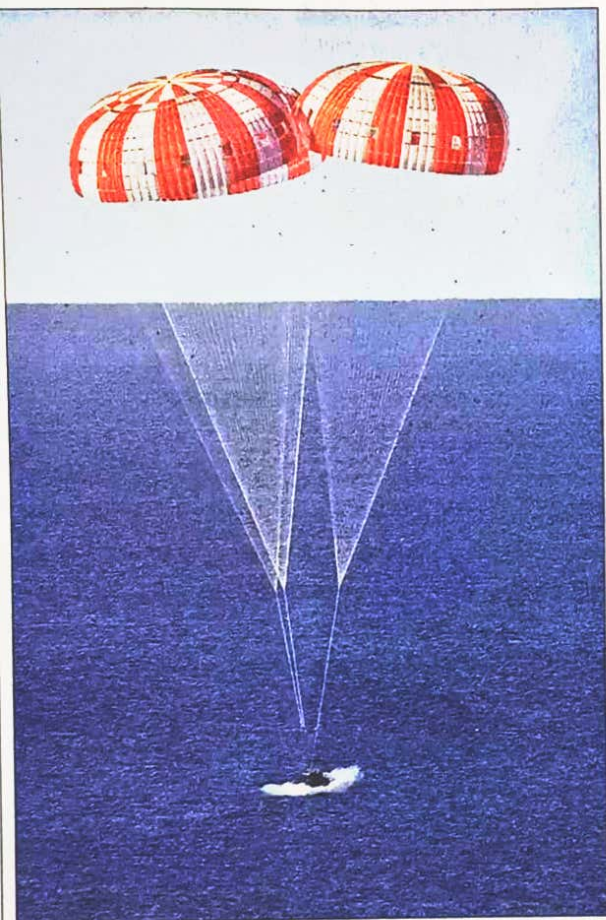
"It's a huge moment for everybody," Jared Isaacman, the Nasa administrator, said from the deck of the USS John P. Murtha, waiting for the astronauts to be brought aboard. "We are going to get back into doing this with frequency, sending missions to the moon until we land on it in 2028 and start building our base."

After splashdown, at 8.07pm Eastern time, members of the recovery team took more than an hour to approach the bobbing capsule as they contended with currents in the waters off San Diego.

They soon helped the astronauts out of the spacecraft, hoisted them up for hovering helicopters to take them to the USS John P. Murtha. All four astronauts were able to walk across the ship's flight deck to a medical bay for examinations.

At a news conference after splashdown, Rick Henfling, the Nasa flight director who oversaw mission control during the re-entry, said the crew was "happy and healthy and ready to come home to Houston".

New York Times News Service



Nasa's Orion spacecraft carrying Artemis II crewmembers splashes down in the Pacific Ocean near San Diego, California, on Friday. (Nasa via Reuters)