

Want to pretend to live on Mars? For a whole year? Apply now



Want to find your inner Matt Damon and spend a year pretending you are isolated on Mars? NASA has a job for you.

To prepare for eventually sending astronauts to Mars, NASA began taking applications Friday for four people to live for a year in Mars Dune Alpha. That's a 1,700-square-foot Martian habitat, created by a 3D-printer, and inside a building at Johnson Space Center in Houston.

The paid volunteers will work a simulated Martian exploration mission complete with spacewalks, limited communications back home, restricted food and resources and equipment failures.

NASA is planning three of these experiments with the first one starting in the fall next year. Food will all be ready-to-eat space food and at the moment there are no windows planned. Some plants will be grown, but not potatoes like in the movie "The Martian." Damon played stranded astronaut Mark Watney, who survived on spuds.

"We want to understand how humans perform in them," said lead scientist Grace Douglas. "We are looking at Mars realistic situations."

The application process opened Friday and they're not seeking just anybody. The requirements are strict, including a master's degree in a science, engineering or math field or pilot experience. Only American citizens or permanent U.S. residents are eligible. Applicants have to be between 30 and 55, in good physical health with no dietary issues and not prone to motion sickness.

That shows NASA is looking for people who are close to astronauts, said former Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield. And, he said, that's a good thing because it is a better experiment if the participants are more similar to the people who will really go to Mars. Past Russian efforts at a pretend Mars mission called Mars 500 didn't end well partly because the people were too much like everyday people, he said.

For the right person this could be great, said Hadfield, who spent five months in orbit in 2013 at the International Space Station, where he played guitar and sang a cover video of David Bowie's "Space Oddity."

"Just think how much you're going to be able to catch up on Netflix," he said. "If they have a musical instrument there, you could go into there knowing nothing and come out a concert musician, if you want."

There could be “incredible freedom” in a “year away from the demands of your normal life.”

Attitude is key, said Hadfield, who has a novel “The Apollo Murders” coming out in the fall. He said the participants need to be like Damon’s Watney character: “Super competent, resourceful and not relying on other people to feel comfortable.”

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears

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