



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

US Astronauts Say SpaceX Capsule 'Came Alive' on Trip Back to Earth

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The two American astronauts who recently completed an historic space **mission** have described details about their electrifying return to Earth.

On May 30, NASA astronauts Robert Behnken and Douglas Hurley became the first astronauts to launch from American soil since the last space shuttle flight in 2011.

The launch was historic because it was the first time a private company launched astronauts into orbit. American company SpaceX built and operated the Crew Dragon **capsule** that carried the astronauts to the International Space Station.

Behnken and Hurley ended their 64-day mission on August 3, when they **splashed down** in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Florida.

The two recently offered their thoughts on the mission and the flight home during a news conference at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas.

It was the first splashdown landing for NASA astronauts in 45 years. SpaceX said it had provided Behnken and Hurley with video and audio of past splashdowns so they would not be surprised during the flight.

Behnken described the **excitement** the two experienced during the tense final minutes of the trip home. "Once we **descended** a little bit into the atmosphere, the Dragon really, it came alive," he said.

Behnken was speaking about the moment the Crew Dragon began firing rocket **thrusters** to slow the spacecraft as it passed through Earth's atmosphere.

He said the thrusters guiding the spacecraft were firing almost continuously. "It doesn't sound like a machine, it sounds like an animal coming through the atmosphere, with all the **puffs** that are happening from the thrusters and the atmospheric noise."

The astronauts experienced 4.2 Gs - or 4.2 times the force of Earth's gravity - as they descended.

When Crew Dragon slowed to about 563 kilometers an hour, the first of two sets of parachutes were deployed, quickly slowing the capsule even more. Behnken described that period as feeling "very much like getting hit in the back of the chair with a baseball bat."

Hurley said he was "almost kind of speechless" at how well the capsule performed. He called the whole mission "flawless" - or perfect.

A recovery team waited for the capsule's splashdown off the Florida coast. The biggest surprise of the mission came just after the splashdown. Close to 25 pleasure boats rushed toward the capsule, ignoring requests for the public to stay away. This put themselves, the astronauts and the recovery team at risk.

Hurley said the capsule's windows were badly burned from re-entry, so he and Behnken could not see the other boats in the area.

He added that while he understood the people on the boats just wanted to be part of the event, he did have concerns for safety. "We'll have to take a look at it because it just can't happen (again) like it did before," Hurley said.

Behnken said he does not think it would be a good idea for people to try to get close to future splashdown landings. "We take extreme **precautions** to make sure it is safe and we do that for a reason."

I'm Bryan Lynn.

Reuters and The Associated Press reported on this story. Bryan Lynn adapted the reports for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

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Words in This Story

mission – *n.* an important task, usually involving travel somewhere

splash down – *v.* land a manned spacecraft in the ocean

capsule – *n.* the part of a spacecraft people live in

excitement – *n.* a feeling of being very happy and enthusiastic

descend – *v.* to move or go down

thruster – *n.* a small rocket engine on a spacecraft

puff – *n.* a short, explosive burst of wind

precaution – *n.* something done to prevent bad things from happening in the future
