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# Meet the Woman Who Has Spent 200 Days in Space



Homeward bound: Cristoforetti prepares for her departure from the space station in June

WSA/NASA

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**T**here's no such thing as a women's league in space. The U.S. may just have won the Women's World Cup, and basketball may have the WNBA, but

there's never been a WNASA or a women's space station. The boys' club that was space travel has long since become a co-ed enterprise. But that doesn't mean female astronauts and cosmonauts don't deserve to be recognized. With crews still predominantly male, there remains a glass ceiling between Earth and orbit, and it is the women, not the men, who must smash it.

One of the most noteworthy of the current corps of female fliers is Italian fighter pilot Samantha Cristoforetti, who recently returned from 200 days aboard the International Space Station (ISS), setting the women's duration record for time in space. Cristoforetti recently spoke to TIME to discuss her experiences in orbit, the challenges she faced, and the insights about life on Earth that come from being off it for so long. The interview has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity:

**TIME: Your recent stay on the ISS was your first trip to space. What surprised you most about your time there?**

**Cristoforetti:** I don't think that I had very set expectations. I was very open, like a blank page. So I discovered many things, like how it feels to float—just that sensation of being so light to the point of having no weight whatsoever, of being able to move in three dimensions. Everything is just effortless. You're like Superman all day long for 200 days. But then of course are the challenges. You're used to setting things down and they're going to still be there when you go and get them. While in space, if you just let something go, it's going to be gone. I got to the point, to the very advanced stage at the end of the mission, where I actually could let something just go, and I had just a subconscious awareness of what it was, and if it started to float away, I would just go and grab it.

**With all the various ways of communicating with Earth when you're on the station, did you still feel any isolation?**

In many ways, you still feel very connected because we are able to make phone calls to people on Earth. We have videoconferences scheduled on the weekends with our families. A selected number of people can send you emails and we can email back and forth. We have kind of slow access to the Internet, and so we can do a little bit of social media and we can use the Internet if we are very patient. On the other hand, you also kind of live in a bubble because there's only so many people who actually have access to you. And then of course when you look at Earth there's an ambivalent feeling because you know that you're not that far but at the same time, it's such an alien view that you really feel like you're disconnected from the world. Everything flies by so fast that you almost don't have the time to make a virtual connection with whatever country or continent or feature is passing beneath you.

**Did you feel you had any privacy while you were on-board?**

The space station, first of all, is huge. Sometimes people think that we are like 6 people enclosed in very close quarters, in a very small environment. I attended a military academy when I was 24, and believe me, we were a lot more in closed quarters back then than I was in the space station. We also have a little bit of a personal space. It's about the size of an old phone booth for people who are old enough to remember phone booths. You can close the doors. You sleep in there. It gets pretty dark. I had some pictures and other little personal items. And so definitely that's your private space, and most of us choose to go in there to make phone calls for example, so that you don't disturb other people but also so that your phone call is private.

**Now that you're the female who holds the record for being in space the longest, how does that feel?**

(Laughs) Well, I think records are more something for media to write about because it's potentially a piece of news. But of course for me, it really doesn't make a huge difference having been in space 200 days as opposed to 190, which would not have been the record. I mean I was happy to stay, but the opportunity to stay longer, which is what led to the record, depended on an accident that we had with [a Progress] cargo vehicle [which failed to reach orbit and delayed operations]. So really I didn't really do anything to earn that record.

**You spent a couple of months with astronauts Scott Kelly and Misha Kornienko, who will be aboard the station for a full year. What do you think is the hardest challenge they will face?**

Well, you know, every person is different, so it's really hard to say what would be challenging for them. But I would imagine staying healthy. I felt over the course of six months of my physical well-being somewhat degrading as time passed. It was nothing that I could really pinpoint, but just the general sensation that my body over time was getting a little bit tired of this environment. I felt like my body probably at some point needed to get back to Earth, to breathing normal air, to be back in normal gravity.

**Did your 200 days in space change your perspective about life on Earth?**

When you look at the Earth from space, it looks like a big space ship that is flying through space, and oh, by the way, carrying all of humanity on it. And so you start to get this feeling that, just as on the space station, we can only

function if we all work together as a crew and we're all crew members. None of us is a passenger. Nobody is up there because they bought a ticket and they're just going to enjoy the ride. You have to take care of each other. Now it's a lot easier when it's six people, but we have to somehow progressively work towards having the same attitude on planet Earth. There's another crew coming afterwards, the next generation, and we have to make sure that we'll leave them a spaceship which is in good shape.