

Russia's 50% Discount Allowed Brazil to Send Its First Astronaut into Space

Contributed by Lílian de Macedo
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On March 22, Brazil will, for the first time, send an astronaut, lieutenant-coronel Marco Pontes, on a mission into space. Pontes will be taking nine Brazilian scientific experiments with him.

One of them, prepared by the Brazilian Agricultural Research Company (EMBRAPA), is intended to evaluate how a seed from a tropical tree behaves aboard a space station, in this case, the Russian Soyuz spacecraft.

According to the scientist in charge, Antonieta Salomão, the experiment will help in understanding more about the physiological processes involved in seed germination. "Once we understand more, we can transmit more solid information to farmers," she affirmed.

Before making the journey into space, however, the project will be subjected to preliminary testing at the National Space Research Institute in São José dos Campos, in the state of São Paulo.

"Passing this test, under simulated flight conditions, is indispensable for all the nine projects that are part of the mission," Salomão said.

The experiments have mainly to do with the fields of engineering, physics, microelectronics, nanotechnology, and biotechnology.

The Brazilian astronaut will spend a total of eight days aboard the Russian spacecraft and will carry a load of 15 kilograms of material to perform the experiments. Only five kilograms can be brought back to Earth. The rest will become space trash.

The trip was dubbed the Centennial Mission, in honor of the hundredth anniversary of Santos Dumont's first flight on the 14 Bis.

What made the mission possible was an agreement signed by president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva last October with Russia, which conceded a 50% discount on the amount - around US\$ 20 million - it usually charges for space travel.

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