

# Brazil's First Astronaut Is in Orbit

Contributed by Alessandra Bastos  
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Brazil's first astronaut, Air Force Lt. Col. Márcio Pontes, and two other astronauts, an American and a Russian, are on their way to the International Space Station aboard the Soyuz TMA-8 vehicle.

The trip takes place 45 years after the world's first astronaut, the Russian Yuri Gagarin, went into space, and 100 years after the first public flight of a heavier-than-air powered craft, the 14-Bis, which was built and piloted by the Brazilian aviation pioneer, Alberto Santos Dumont.

Pontes has a Brazilian flag sewn on the left sleeve of his flight suit. He is also carrying commemorative medals celebrating his own flight and that of Santos Dumont.

According to Pontes, his heartbeat speeded up when he saw the rocket on the launch pad. "It is a lot of responsibility," he said. "It weighs on you."

But, later when he was strapped into his seat in the Soyuz, he said: "Contrary to what a lot of people probably imagine, I feel very calm now."

## Liftoff

Exactly at 8:29 am in Kazakhstan yesterday (11:29 pm in Brasília), at the Baikonur rocket launch center, Brazilian Air Force Lt. Col. Marcos Pontes lifted off in the Soyuz TMA-8 vehicle along with two other astronauts on his way to the International Space Station.

Pontes, the Russian astronaut, Pavel Vinogradov, and the American, Jeffrey Williams, will remain strapped in their seats in the tiny Soyuz capsule until 1:13 am on Saturday (Brasilia time) when they are scheduled to dock at the ISS (that means they cannot move around for two days, four hours and 13 minutes).

Pontes will be at the ISS for eight days. The other two astronauts will stay in space for six months.

During his stay at the ISS, Pontes will communicate with earth three times. He is to speak with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva by video conference on Wednesday April 5. He will also talk to Brazilian journalists. And near the end of his stay he will be in touch with mission technicians.

Pontes will perform eight experiments aboard the ISS where gravity is near zero.

The Brazilian Space Agency paid US\$ 10 million for the Pontes trip.

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was at the residence of the ambassador of China, Jiang Yuand, where he watched the launch of the Soyuz TMA-8 on television.

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