

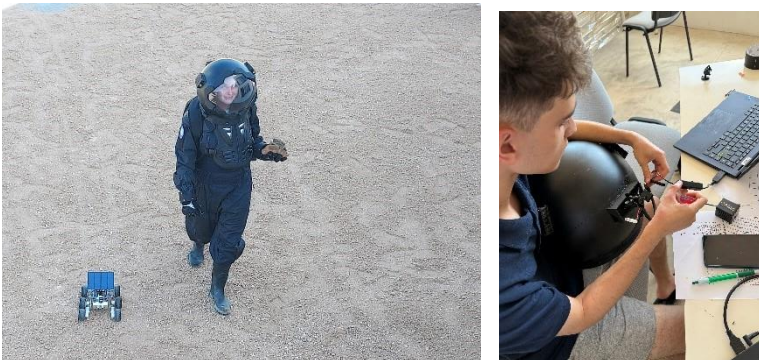


PRESS RELEASE

European High School Students Experience the Rigours of a Simulated Mars Mission in the Alentejo

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MONSARAZ, PORTUGAL – 30 June 2025 – The silence was broken by cheers and the snap of camera shutters as nine European high school students stepped out of a simulated Mars environment in Portugal, successfully completing the first-of-its-kind EXPLORE analog mission. From 23 to 27 June 2025, these students from Austria, Greece, and Portugal traded their everyday lives for a challenging five-day immersion in an isolated, Mars-like landscape near Monsaraz, in the wilds of the Alentejo province.



Photos: Left, Angelika (a student from Ellinogermaniki Agogi, Greece) carries out a solo EVA (Extra Vehicular Activity) to search for meteorites using the rover. Right, Pedro (a student from Escola Secundária Frei Gonalo de Azevedo, Portugal) in the habitat, trying to find a solution for a malfunction in the helmet ventilation system [Image credits: Erasmus+ project EXpeditionary Program for Learning OppoRtunities in analog space Exploration (EXPLORE)]

This pioneering mission is part of the [EXPLORE project](#), an EU co-funded Erasmus+ program launched in 2023. EXPLORE, short for EXpeditionary Program for Learning OppoRtunities in analog space Exploration, aims to inspire a passion for STEAM subjects in the next generation by bringing the thrill of space exploration into classrooms through immersive simulations of Mars and Moon environments.

A collaborative effort of leading organizations in space education and research, namely the [Austrian Space Forum](#) (OeWF), the [Committee on Space Research](#) (COSPAR), [NUCLIO](#), [Ellinogermaniki Agogi](#) (EA), and [OLA](#) – Observat3rio do Lago Alqueva, it provides an exceptional opportunity for students to leave their comfort zones and experience life in an extreme, isolated environment.



Project lead Gernot Grömer (OeWF) said: *“A simulated Mars mission presents unique challenges – from the cognitive and mental workload to challenges of working in an international, interdisciplinary and intercultural environment, whilst embedded in an immersive tech-dominated setting. Yet these nine students not only faced these conditions head-on but actually thrived on that learning journey with self-discipline, resilience, and a truly impressive level of dedication and enthusiasm. Watch out for this generation of future explorers: they will be the ones that will realize the first actual human Mars mission.”*

Analog missions, like this one, are critical for preparing for actual space missions. They provide realistic simulations of the extreme conditions found on Mars or the Moon, allowing for the testing of equipment, procedures, and the study of the psychological and physiological effects of isolation on crews. The barren, reddish landscape of the Monsaraz site in summer almost perfectly replicates the terrain of Mars, making it an ideal location for such a simulation.

Rosa Doran (NUCLIO, Chair of COSPAR’s Panel on Education) commented on the mission's impact: *“The transformation we observed in these students throughout the mission was remarkable. This type of hands-on, immersive learning experience is crucial for developing essential skills like problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability. I am looking forward to following the progress of these young people. And let’s not forget their classmates, working behind the scenes to support them, following from a distance, as much a vital part of the mission as the analog astronauts themselves.”*

Student analog astronaut Pedro (from Escola Secundária Frei Gonçalo de Azevedo in Cascais, Portugal) shared his experience: *“At first in the habitat I was a little nervous, but afterwards it was great. I learned that it is important to follow procedure, and when we work as a team, everything is easier.”* He and his teammate Patricia (Portugal) agree: *“Science is a topic which connects people, even if they have different opinions on everything else, we can relate to each other easily because of our passion, and EXPLORE is all about that.”*

Teresa Sousa, a teacher from Escola Secundária Frei Gonçalo de Azevedo in Cascais, Portugal, added: *“The EXPLORE project inspires dreams and makes us believe in the best that young people have to give. The students not only deepened their understanding of science and engineering but also developed critical life skills. This extraordinary educational adventure provided them with a first-hand look at the challenges and rewards of space exploration, and I have no doubt it will shape their future paths.”*

The mayor of the municipality of Reguengos Monsaraz, Marta Prates, was present at the closing of the mission to meet the students that emerged from their habitat, and she visited the Mission Support Centre. Media representatives present had the opportunity to interact

with the EXPLORE 1 team, examine the mission toolkits and experience for themselves a little of the life of an analog astronaut through various hands-on activities, including trying on parts of the space suits, as used by the students.

EXPLORE 1 has already received extensive coverage in Portugal's leading press, such as [Público](#) and [Forbes Portugal](#), as well as other major media, including the highest-rated television channel, [SIC](#).

The next EXPLORE mission is scheduled for early summer 2026. Teachers eager to offer their students this life-changing experience in the world of analog missions are encouraged to apply through the EXPLORE website: <https://explore-project.eu/join-explore/>.

Opportunities for sponsorship and support are still available for companies seeking visibility in Europe's only open-field Mars simulation station. Innovative companies and institutions can also leverage this unique setting for team-building events, offering clients or employees an unforgettable analog mission experience. Contact alquevahab@oewf.org for more information.

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Press kit [in English](#)

Press kit [in Portuguese](#)

Selected photos from EXPLORE 1 mission [here](#).

Please note that photos should be used only in connection with the **EXPLORE – EXpeditionary Program for Learning OppoRtunities** in analog space Exploration project – an Erasmus+ funded project under Action Type: KA220-SCH – Cooperation partnerships in school education. Grant Agreement nº 2023-1-AT01-KA220-SCH-000154094. Period: September 2023 – August 2026

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About Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. It has an estimated budget of €26.2 billion. This is nearly double the funding compared to its predecessor programme (2014-2020). The 2021-2027 programme places a strong focus on social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life. It supports priorities and activities set out in the European Education Area, Digital Education Action Plan and the European Skills Agenda. The programme also supports 4/5 the European Pillar of Social Rights; implements the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027; and develops the European dimension in sport.

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