PRESS RELEASE

20 April 2026
For immediate release

From Classroom to Mars: European Students Return from 6-Day Analog Space Mission

Monsaraz, Portugal — 20 April 2026— Nine high school students from Austria, Greece, and Portugal have emerged from a specially designed habitat near Monsaraz, Portugal, marking the successful completion of EXPLORE-2—a six-day simulated Mars mission that placed young Europeans in the shoes of analog astronauts.

The students lived, worked, and explored as if they were on Mars, operating rovers, conducting scientific experiments, and solving real challenges—all without any outside assistance. The mission ran from 13-19 April 2026 at OLA – Observatório do Lago Alqueva in Portugal's Alentejo region, an area whose barren, reddish landscape resembles the Red Planet.

Nine high school students from Austria, Greece, and Portugal are preparing to step beyond their familiar surroundings into an extraordinary simulated space mission in the Alentejo region of Portugal.

Photos: (left) 2 students carry out a "space walk" in protective suits, (right) the EXPLORE-2 crew ***(Image credit: EXPLORE)***

Jean-Claude Worms, Executive Director of the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR), one of the project partners, says "Another week of analog EXPLORERS to Mars has just concluded beautifully. It was awesome to see what highly motivated high school students can do when confronted with the challenges of a simulated space mission. They came out of the facility transformed, instantly becoming dedicated ambassadors for the promotion of STEM education. We cannot wait to see some of them attending the COSPAR Scientific Assemblies in the future!"

"We're not just supporting students to learn about space—we're showing them what it's like to live it," said Rosa Doran, President of NUCLIO, one of the key project partners and Chair of the COSPAR Panel on Education. "This mission represents everything we envisioned when we created EXPLORE: young people gaining authentic experience in exploration, self-motivation, self-confidence, teamwork, and scientific thinking."

A step beyong EXPLORE-1

EXPLORE-2 builds on the foundation laid by its predecessor, EXPLORE-1, which took place in June 2025. But this latest mission represents a significant leap forward in both educational ambition and operational realism.

Participants actively designed their own mission plans—scheduling experiments, integrating scientific investigations, and making operational decisions—using procedures adapted from AMADEE, the Austrian Space Forum's professional flagship research program. Students took on defined crew roles, working collaboratively to manage the daily challenges of isolated mission operations.

"We gave these students real responsibility," explained Gernot Grömer, Director of the Austrian Space Forum (OeWF) and project lead. "They weren't just following a script—they were making decisions, managing resources, and working as an actual crew. It is a shining example of European cooperation with the very generation that will one day enable our society's most ambitious journey yet: A crewed mission to the Red Planet."

One highlight was the EXPLORE Experiment Design Challenge, a competition that invited students across Europe to propose scientific investigations for the mission. The winning entry came from the Antalya Science and Art Center (BİLSEM) in Turkey: an experiment testing astronaut reflexes before, during, and after wearing Delta suits—the specialized attire students wore each time they left the habitat to collect rock samples or conduct field experiments.

Angelos Lazoudis, project partner and senior researcher from Ellinogermaniki Agogi says, "The mission is not only about knowledge and learning new topics, it's about collaboration and communication. These are the basic skills that the students will carry on in their life after leaving school. Relying on trusting colleagues, working as a team, is as important as having knowledge or technical know-how for a successful mission."

Voices from the mission

Some of the students and teachers who participated shared their reflections on the experience:

"Space, experiments and isolation taught me a lot, not only about scientific procedures but also about myself. I learnt that patience is very important and I can't always

accomplish everything by myself. Every crew member was necessary for OUR CREW to function efficiently. Just like that, one week passed, filled with moments that will remain engraved in my mind forever." Danai Argyriadi, Greek student, EXPLORE-2 crew.

"Missions like these remind me why I fell in love with the intersection of science and teaching." Marigold Muchmore, teacher from Austria accompanying students on the EXPLORE-2 mission.

"Watching these young students work on this project, taking on their assigned roles with such dedication and professionalism, solving problems together and establishing a strong bond of friendship, trust and respect in such a short time makes me proud to be a science teacher. I believe that with them, the future of humanity is in good hands." Sandra Baptista, teacher from Portugal accompanying students on the EXPLORE-2 mission.

"It was challenging for both students and teachers, especially at the beginning. But I'm impressed by how they worked together as a team, how they set up their roles during the mission, they knew exactly what they were doing. EXPLORE is an…
Expedition for
Xtra research to
Pursue
Locate
Observe
Reveal and
Encounter the unknown." Eleni Krokou, teacher from Greece accompanying students on the EXPLORE-2 mission.

Why analog missions matter

Before astronauts travel to Mars or the Moon, they train on Earth—in environments that simulate the harsh realities of space. These "analog missions" test equipment, procedures, and the psychological effects of isolation on crews. The terrain near Monsaraz provides an ideal Mars-like backdrop for such training.

The students wore spacesuit simulators during their "spacewalks", experiencing first-hand the constraints and protocols that real astronauts follow. This immersive approach ensures participants understand not just the science, but the operational realities of exploration.

By students, for students

A unique aspect of the EXPLORE program is how participants are selected. All students taking part in EXPLORE-2 were chosen by their classmates and Space Coach teachers—meaning these nine young people represent the trust and confidence of

their entire school communities. What's more remarkable: the students had never met each other before the mission began. In just one week, they had to build trust, establish team spirit, and learn to cooperate under pressure—skills that define successful space crews. They also had to adapt each day's mission plan themselves when difficulties or unexpected changes occurred, making sure all the roles involved aspects of the mission.

Any school in Europe can take part in the EXPLORE project through the program's virtual toolkit, bringing analog space exploration into classrooms worldwide. In the future, the Monsaraz Mars Analog Station shall be open to students from across Europe for these week-long experiences.

About EXPLORE

EXPLORE—the Expeditionary Program for Learning OppoRtunities in analog space Exploration—is a unique EU co-funded Erasmus+ initiative bringing the reality of space exploration into schools. The program aims to raise interest in STEAM fields, bring innovation to the classroom, and improve digital literacy among educators and learners. The project is led by the Austrian Space Forum (OeWF) in partnership with NUCLIO (Portugal), Ellinogermaniki Agogi (Greece), the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR), and Observatório do Lago Alqueva (Portugal).

Website: https://explore-project.eu
Social media: www.facebook.com/EXPLOREprojectEU and www.instagram.com/exploreprojecteu/

Press kits are available in English and Portuguese

Please note that these 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 n° 2023-1-AT01-KA220-SCH-000154094. Period: September 2023 – August 2026. For any photo used, credit should be given to Erasmus+ project EXpeditionary Program for Learning OppoRtunities in analog space Exploration (EXPLORE)

About Erasmus+

Co-funded by the European Union

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.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Schools and students who took part in EXPLORE-2

Ąžuolas Račinskas:	Amadeus International School, Vienna, Austria
Lena Kappeller:	Bundes Real Gymnasium in der Au, Austria
Lisa Nöestler:	Europagymnasium Auhof Linz, Austria
Danai Argyriadi:	Ellinogermaniki Agogi, Greece
Andrianos Lalagkas:	Ellinogermaniki Agogi, Greece
Alexandros Papathanasiou:	American Farm School Thessaloniki, Greece
Francisco Bartolo:	Escola Secundária de Paredes, Portugal
Francisco Lucas:	Agrupamento de Escolas Professor Agostinho da Silva, Portugal
Maria Francisco:	Agrupamento de Escolas Frei Gonçalo de Azevedo, Portugal

About the Austrian Space Forum (OeWF)

The Austrian Space Forum is one of the world's leading institutions conducting Mars analog missions, thus paving the way for the future human exploration of the Red Planet. Experts from a broad variety of disciplines as well as the spaceflight sector constitute the core of the OeWF's continued endeavours that on a regular basis include national and international institutions from science and industry to work at the cutting edge of scientific research. In doing so the Austrian Space Forum is using its excellent contacts to opinion leaders, politics and media to further and internationally propagate Austrian top-level research. The Austrian Space Forum also contributes significantly to inspiring and educating young people in the sectors of science, technology and engineering. The OeWF offers internships to students and pupils, its experts supervise scientific papers on a regular basis.

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For more information, visit www.oewf.org

About the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR)

COSPAR, the largest international scientific society dedicated to promoting global cooperation in space research, was established in 1958. It serves as a neutral platform for scientific dialogue among scientists from around the world. Today, COSPAR

comprises 49 national scientific institutions and 13 international scientific unions, with 14,000 space scientists actively participating in its activities, including attending assemblies, contributing to 8 Scientific Commissions and 16 panels and task groups, and publishing in its two scientific journals. COSPAR's core mission is to facilitate dialogue and encourage international collaboration among space stakeholders across the globe. It operates through scientific commissions, panels and task groups that encompass all disciplines of space science, from Earth and atmospheric sciences to planetary science, astrophysics, solar and space plasma physics, and life and microgravity sciences. A recent focus has been on strengthening ties between science and industry. This was achieved by forming the Committee on Industry Relations, which includes 18 leading aerospace companies worldwide. The Committee advises COSPAR on integrating industry capabilities into its activities, ensuring mutual benefits for both science and industry. COSPAR's network and connections with space organisations and decision-makers allows efficient communication and dissemination about the project to a very large audience worldwide, backed by an experienced staff member and science outreach experts available through its constituency.

https://cospar.world

About NUCLIO

NUCLIO is a non-profit association and an NGO for development (ONGD) founded in 2001 whose mission is to bring innovation and inclusion into education, making it a driver of social transformation that promotes, across all parts of the world, active citizenship, literacies, critical thinking, and empathy. The work done by the team in the field on innovation in education includes the promotion of student-centred approaches, STEAM learning, Maker skills and the Digital transition, Democracy and participatory activities, Inclusion and Diversity, Design Thinking, Scientific Research in the Classroom, Open Schooling and Innovative student Assessment (among others). An official training centre recognised by the Portuguese Ministry of Education, NUCLIO is also the coordinator of the Galileo Teacher Training Program, one of the largest astronomy education efforts in the world, the Galileo Teacher Training Program, endorsed by the International Astronomical Union and UNESCO. The program has already reached over 70,000 teachers from over 120 nations. NUCLIO is the coordinator of the Portuguese Language Office of Astronomy for Development (PLOAD, an initiative of the International Astronomical Union (IAU), which brings together partners from Portuguese-speaking countries and aims to use astronomy as a vehicle for the promotion of development.

http://nuclio.org

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COSPAR
COMMITTEE ON
SPACE RESEARCH

About Ellinogermaniki Agogi

Ellinogermaniki Agogi (EA) is one of the most innovative schools in Europe. It has 2500 students (ages 5 to 18 years old) and 250 teachers in different disciplines. EA has a very strong vision-generated interest and rich research and development activity in the fields of Inquiry Based Science Education (IBSE), Project Based Learning (PBL), and STEM education in combination with digital, online based learning environments and tools that use virtual reality, augmented reality and story-based education. EA is continuously modernizing STEM education by promoting and creating user-driven learning environments for students and offering numerous opportunities for teachers' professional development to be prepared and thrive in the landscape of unprecedented challenges and opportunities in the 21st century. EXPLORE has benefited from their experience in creating and testing engaging material for EXPLORE, ensuring that students are on-board right from the start.

https://ea.gr

About Biosky, Lda

OLA (official name BIOSKY) provides access to a professional astronomical observatory and educational programs related to astronomy. OLA is located in a special region in Portugal known for its dark skies and dry and extreme weather conditions during most of the school year. It hosts the perfect conditions for the creation of the analog site necessary for the EXPLORE project.

www.olagoalqueva.pt

About Monsaraz Analog Research Station (MARS)

The Monsaraz Analog Research Station, located at the OLA - Observatorio do Lago Alqueva, is Europe's only permanent open-air simulation station for planetary surface field campaigns with both the habitation and mission support infrastructure at that level. It is complementary to the ESA/DLR LUNA facility in Cologne, Germany, or the EU-funded SHEE habitat at the International Space University, France. The station can be used for testing and validating new technologies and products as well as for education, outreach and teambuilding.