

Space crew wanted - must have good toilet habits

Could you stand 500 days in solitary confinement with your other half; no TV, no Pinot Grigio for comfort? DICK LUMSDEN uncovers the hidden catches in a mission to Mars

IT'S funny how your memory plays tricks on you. I could swear blind that when Neil Armstrong first set foot on the Moon and uttered his now immortal words, I was watching on a black and white TV in our school assembly room.

However, as I now know he jumped off the ladder just before four o'clock in the morning, overnight on a Sunday, during the school holidays in late July. I have clearly been deluding myself all these years.

To be fair, I thought space travel was pretty much stuck back in these black and white TV days, and it's been a while since I even thought about it, except to wonder occasionally how much better it would be if, instead of commuting on Greater Anglia each day, I could be teleported from Manningtree to Covent Garden.

But it's right back up there on the agenda again this month with the news that the search is on for an older, married couple to pilot a manned flight to Mars.

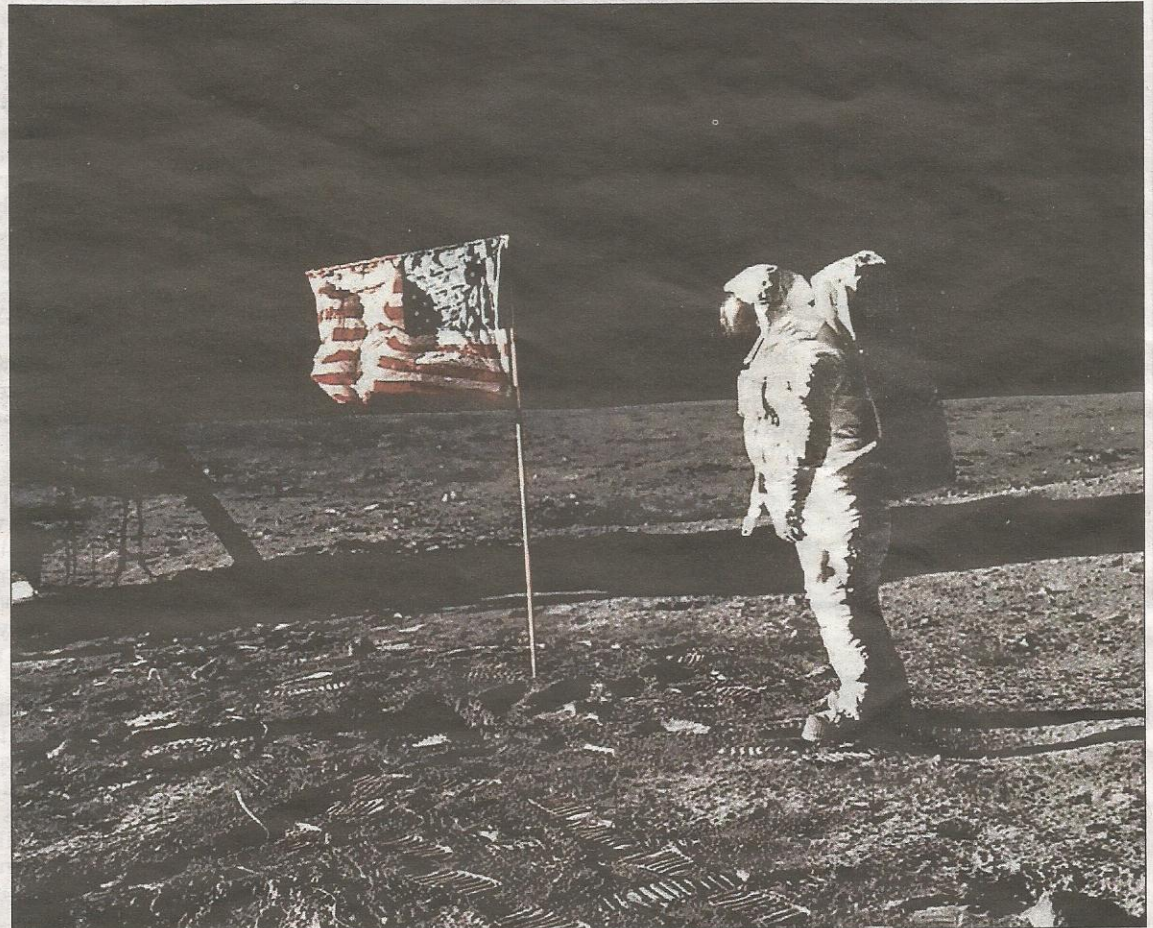
Don't get me wrong, I'm most certainly not interested in going. I've just come back from a very nice long weekend in Venice with Mrs Lumsden. It was lovely, thanks very much, we didn't have a cross word - but it only lasted four days.

Inspiration Mars is expected to take 500 days there and back - and they won't even land for a look around when they get there!

Are these scientists mad! Do they know what most married couples would do to each other if cooped up in a speeding metal container for a year and a half? A three hour trip in a traffic jam round the M25 is bad enough.

Apparently they want a more mature married couple because the amount of radiation they would be exposed to in 500 days would almost certainly render them infertile. But they figure at that age they would be past having kids in any case. What a great way to sell the job. Oh, and the hope is that they can draw on their years of marital bliss to see them through the rocky spells when Earth becomes a distant speck in the background, the Sky signal is lost and there's no hope of keeping up with EastEnders.

The mission to Mars is the brainchild of a guy called Dennis Tito, a former NASA engineer who went on to make a fortune with an investment company he set up. Reportedly, he became the world's first "space tourist" by paying \$20 million to have a week on the International Space



MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: Men have walked on the moon (Buzz Aldrin pictured here) and now an older married couple could be destined for the first manned mission to Mars. Crikey
Photograph: CONTRIBUTED

Station. I would have been happier with a week in Florida and a day trip to Cape Canaveral.

Worryingly for the "lucky" couple who will eventually man (and woman) his spacecraft, he is planning to use an existing rocket and module which has only ever carried cargo and needs to be fitted out to carry human passengers. This has led to some interesting details emerging, such as how much food and supplies would be needed to keep the couple alive on the non-stop flight.

The statistic which caught my eye was the amount of toilet roll they plan to carry - 23 kilograms. How did they come up with that pretty precise and pretty random figure? Digging a bit deeper, I visited the www.encyclopedia.toiletpaperworld.com - yes there is an entire website devoted to toilet paper - and found out that the average toilet roll weighs 227 grams.

So that means they are planning on packing about 125 toilet rolls to last a year and a half - or just under two rolls per week.

Clearly there will need to be some strict rationing going on there, otherwise it will be "Houston, we have a problem" about six months into the trip.

I suspect that the scientists behind this harebrained scheme are all young blokes who don't have the faintest idea about how a middle aged woman thinks and acts - with or without her husband. For instance, I don't see anything listed there for the other essential kit they will have to carry: 500 handbags (a different one for each day), boxes of shampoo, conditioner, make-up and of course two hair driers (one as a spare in case the first one packs up). Then there will be summer coats, winter coats, spring coats and autumn coats - I know the spacecraft isn't planning on landing, but just in case it has to do an emergency layover somewhere the coatage has to be right.

It doesn't sound as if there is going to be much privacy on this trip, another reason for sending an old married couple perhaps.

After a few decades of marriage, the listeners back at space base won't be expecting to hear the question "did the earth move for you" unless it's referring to the spacecraft leaving orbit.

All in all it is a pretty flawed concept. But, today's culture of reality TV and 15 minutes of fame means there will undoubtedly be no shortage of volunteers.

Somehow though, if it ever becomes a reality, I can't see it having as much of an impact as Neil Armstrong stepping on the Moon. Middle aged couple taking gap year in space isn't really that interesting - whether or not they have good toilet etiquette.

Dick Lumsden is Managing Director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to older consumers. If you have any views on this article, or are over 50 and would like to take part occasionally in some gentle consumer research, please contact him on: