



COSPAR

COMMITTEE ON
SPACE RESEARCH

MEDIA ADVISORY

2 April 2026

For immediate release

EXPLORE-2 Mission: Students Lead Mars Simulation in Portugal

WHAT: EXPLORE-2 for European high school students to embark on a simulated space mission

WHO: Nine students (age 16-18) from Austria, Greece, and Portugal, with partner organizations: the Austrian Space Forum (OeWF), NUCLIO, Ellinogermaniki Agogi (EA), the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR), and Observatório do Lago Alqueva (OLA).

WHEN: 13-19 April 2026

WHERE: Monsaraz, Alentejo, Portugal

WHY: Students will live, work, and think like space explorers, simulating being part of an international space crew, facing and solving real challenges

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.



Image credit:
EXPLORE

This six-day immersive experience, scheduled for 13-19 April 2026 at OLA – Observatório do Lago Alqueva near Monsaraz, Portugal, will see them live and work in a specially designed habitat, operate rovers, and conduct scientific experiments, all without outside assistance. A press conference will be held at the end of the analog mission, on 19 April, offering media the opportunity to interact with the team.

Building on the success of EXPLORE-1

EXPLORE-2 is part of the Expeditionary Program for Learning Opportunities in analog



COSPAR

COMMITTEE ON
SPACE RESEARCH

MEDIA ADVISORY

space Exploration (EXPLORE), an EU co-funded Erasmus+ program bringing the reality of space exploration into schools. EXPLORE is a collaborative effort led by the Austrian Space Forum (OeWF), with NUCLIO, Ellinogermaniki Agogi (EA), the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR), and Observatório do Lago Alqueva (OLA) to raise interest and awareness of the importance of STEAM fields, to bring innovation into the classroom, and to improve educators' and learners' digital literacy.

This mission builds on the success of EXPLORE-1 that took place in June 2025 and represents a significant step forward in both educational terms and practical realism, incorporating the operational procedures from AMADEE, the flagship research program of the Austrian Space Forum. Participants in EXPLORE-2 will actively contribute to the design of their own mission plans (scheduling, experiment integration, and operational decision-making), fostering critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.

EXPLORE-2 experiments have been selected through a student competition, the EXPLORE Experiment Challenge, increasing the quality and diversity of scientific investigations conducted during the mission, and encouraging scientific ownership among the students.

About analog missions

Analog missions are ground-based simulations designed to replicate the extreme conditions of space environments—such as those found on Mars or the Moon. These missions play a vital role in testing equipment, procedures, and the psychological and physiological effects of isolation on crews before actual space travel. The site near Monsaraz offers a barren, reddish landscape closely resembling Mars, making it an ideal location for this type of training. The students will wear Delta suits each time they leave the habitat for scientific experiments, such as rock sampling.

Hands-on experience in space science

"We believe the future of space exploration lies in inspiring today's students. EXPLORE-2 represents our continued commitment to giving young people authentic, hands-on experience in space science. These students aren't just learning about space—they're living it," says Rosa Doran, Director of NUCLIO.

Student Danae, preparing for the mission, says: *"EXPLORE-2 feels like the start of an exciting journey, I'm ready to EXPLORE beyond my comfort zone...and see how much I can grow. I'm really curious to discover what this experience has in store!"*

End-of-Mission press conference

A press conference will be held on Sunday 19 April 2026, 12h-13h (UTC+1), to witness the mission closure as the student analog astronauts leave the mission habitat.





COSPAR

COMMITTEE ON
SPACE RESEARCH

MEDIA ADVISORY

Media representatives will be able to ask questions in person or remotely. The press conference will include unique photo opportunities and the possibility to interact with the EXPLORE-2 mission team. The media present will also be able to engage in a variety of hands-on activities to get a feel of what it is like to be an astronaut, including taking part in one of the scientific experiments performed during the mission, and a close-up look at the EXPLORE toolkits.

There will also be opportunities to interview the students and their accompanying teachers via video conference remotely during the mission, to get direct feedback on their experience as it happens. To register for the End-of-Mission Press Conference, please email: leigh.fergus@cosparhq.cnes.fr by 17 April 2026. Once registered you will receive the zoom link for remote attendance.

Requests for one-to-one interviews of project lead Gernot Grömer (OeWF), NUCLIO director Rosa Doran, and OLA director Leonel Godinho, and the students, should be addressed to leigh.fergus@cosparhq.cnes.fr

Fun facts:

- All the students taking part in EXPLORE-2 were selected by their classmates and Space Coach teachers.
- The students have not met each other before—trust, team-work and cooperation will have to be established early to ensure mission success.
- Any school can take part in the EXPLORE project, no matter where, by using the EXPLORE virtual toolkit.

About EXPLORE:

EXPLORE is an Erasmus+ funded project bringing immersive analog space missions to European classrooms. Partners include the Austrian Space Forum (OeWF), Ellinogermaniki Agogi (Greece), NUCLIO (Portugal), and COSPAR.

Website: <https://explore-project.eu>

Social media: www.facebook.com/EXPLOREprojectEU and www.instagram.com/exploreprojecteu/

Press kits available in [English](#) and [Portuguese](#)

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 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)*.





COSPAR

COMMITTEE ON
SPACE RESEARCH

MEDIA ADVISORY

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.

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.

Media Contact: Mag. Monika Fischer, OeWF Media Lead: monika.fischer@oewf.org
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





COSPAR

COMMITTEE ON
SPACE RESEARCH

MEDIA ADVISORY

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>

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





COSPAR

COMMITTEE ON
SPACE RESEARCH

MEDIA ADVISORY

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.

