

A Cuffer

with Chris Hadfield



The space cowboy shares his thoughts on Mars One, the Tablelands and readjusting to life on Earth.

By Linda Browne

As a nine-year-old boy growing up on a corn farm in southern Ontario, Chris Hadfield gazed up at the sky and dreamed about becoming an astronaut. Since then, the now retired astronaut, 55, has had many firsts: the first Canadian to walk in space, the first Canadian to operate the Canadarm in space, the first Canadian to command the International Space Station (ISS), among many others. He's been hailed by the BBC as "the most famous astronaut since Neil Armstrong" (who, along with Buzz Aldrin, inspired Hadfield to become an astronaut when they walked on the moon). For a man who has accomplished so much, he remains incredibly humble and grounded (pun intended). With his space boots hung up and his feet firmly planted on Earth, Hadfield now spends his days sharing his experiences with audiences all over the planet that he loves so dearly. In October, the astronaut chatted with *Downhome*, offering a glimpse into the life of the man behind all those space missions.

Downhome: Did you have any "wow" moments while looking at Earth from space?

Chris Hadfield: When you see it, it is stunning in its beauty. It is much more overwhelmingly beautiful than anything you can anticipate...Maybe if you read about Notre-Dame and study Notre-Dame for 25 years and then finally get to Paris and walk across the square and open up the doors and walk inside, you're not shocked or startled by it. It's more like you're just completely reaffirmed by the beauty of it and it makes it all real to you. And I think that's more how it felt, just because of the decades of preparation beforehand. But you can't belittle it – the unique jewel-like beauty of the planet, the improbability of it, looking at it and the constantly changing gorgeousness of it. All of those are very powerful.

DH: When you're looking up at the sky and see the ISS going by, is it surreal to you to think, "I was up there for six months on that thing"?

CH: I completely understand exactly what's happening when I look up and watch the space station go over, and I completely understood what was going on when I was on board it and working and going around the world and looking down. But somehow when I walk outside now in the evening and watch the station go over, I have trouble connecting the two. They're like discrete things; I don't know how long it's going to take to make them feel like one and the same in my life.

DH: What was it like for you readjusting mentally to life back on Earth?

CH: I think it's been easier for me, mostly because it was not just a rare

and completely different slice of my life...I think it was four and a half years from the time I knew about this flight until we launched. And then we flew in space for five months, and then we landed, and then there's months and months and months of debriefs and medical rehabilitation. So that takes away the weirdness of it.

DH: The Mars One project is looking at sending crews to Mars as early as 2024. Do you think that's plausible?

CH: Mars One, to me, is a really interesting popularity contest. It was a couple of guys in Holland who were talking about five or six years ago and thought, 'What if we could organize a one-way trip to Mars? Would anybody want to go?' And they thought 'Well let's see,' and they organized it and they put together sort of a rough, straw man plan on how that might work and then put it out, and hundreds of thousands of people were interested, which to me is really interesting. It shows the fundamental

human interest in exploration. It shows what we're curious about. And so that to me, that's probably the most significant part of it. But they don't have any real chance of going. There are no vehicles, there's no real technical plan.

DH: In recent years at the Tablelands on Newfoundland's west coast, scientists have been looking into the presence of life in rocks that are similar to those on Mars. What's your take on the importance of land-based research as we look forward to eventually going to Mars?

CH: I've seen the Avalon and all of Newfoundland so many times. I've been over it thousands of times...it's the last land you cross before you head across the Atlantic and it sits so often against the descending sun. It's just so pretty. So I had a good look at it and I've seen the texture of it. And the ancient nature of the rock is evident even from kilometres up and it's swept fairly clear so you can see it. We need that type of understanding, of course, to prepare ourselves before we can travel

further. You want to get your act together before you start taking big chances...So we have people – our geologists, our scientists, but also our astronauts – working and training in a lot of the more ancient parts of the world just to try and understand the nature of it better, but also to understand how to prepare ourselves better. We've had people way up on Devon Island, where there's a huge asteroid crater. We have people training underneath lakes out in British Columbia, freshwater lakes that have sort of this strange form of coral growing in them called stromatolite that resembles what the earliest life on Earth looked like millions and millions of years ago. And it's almost as if we're exploring another planet, when you're deep in a one-person submarine underneath that lake.

DH: If you could go back to your nine-year-old self, what would you say to him?

CH: He was inspired by some combination of reality and fantasy. Comic books and "Tarzan" and

2001: A Space Odyssey and "Star Trek" were almost as important and real to that nine-year-old boy as was the moon landing. But I am the product of my little nine-year-old self's decisions. And so just before my third space flight, which was from Russia, my dad was almost 80 so he didn't travel all the way to Kazakhstan to watch the launch. But he asked my brother, who did come, to tell me to trust myself, to trust my instincts, to recognize the things that are important to me and that I've prepared myself for; stuff's going to come up that you don't expect. But stick to your guns. Trust your basic instinct and the things that make you tick and the things that you've learned over the years. And I think I would say the same thing now, given the chance to whisper in the ear of my nine-year-old self, and that is: It's not going to go the way you planned, but trust yourself and stick to it and it's amazing where it might lead you. ☺

For the complete interview and to listen to Chris Hadfield tell his own story, visit www.downhomelife.com/magazine.

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