Out of This World

My ethereal experience at Adult Space Academy.

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The quote instantly struck me. Attributed to space architect Wernher von Braun, it was emblazoned on the wall as I ascended the spiral staircase inside one of the U.S. Space and Rocket Center's buildings: "The rocket will free man from his remaining chains, the chains of gravity, which still tie him to this planet. It will open to him the gates of heaven."

Shortly after reading, I walked into the Davidson Center for Space Exploration where the impressively large Saturn V Moon Rocket towered above me in all its glory. Two rocket scientists in white lab coats warmly greeted me, one of whom worked for many years on the engine directly above our heads. I felt a rush of childlike excitement as I realized for one weekend, I would be free of the chains that bound me to earth and my comfort zone.

Enter Adult Space Academy.

I originally only thought of space camp as the coveted prize you won as a child in the early 1990s after you successfully made it out of the maze on Nickelodeon's television show *Legends of the Hidden Temple*. I remember the field trip I took to the space center when I was younger, riding the simulators like I was at Six Flags and eating freeze-dried ice cream as if it was going out of style.

The U.S. Space Shuttle Program ran from 1972 to 2011. During that time, more than 355 people from 16 countries flew more than 135 flights and conducted more than 2,000 experiments. I was able to catch a glimpse into what this experience might be like.

Over an action-packed three days, I got to role play in interactive space shuttle missions, construct and launch my own rocket, go on an informative tour with a rocket scientist, and learn about the history and future of the space program. On the 1/16th Chair, patterned after the simulator that the Apollo astronauts used for moonwalk training, I felt like I was literally bunny hopping across the moon. The G-Force simulator and multi-axis trainer made me feel like my body was being split open from all directions.

Shortly after my arrival on Friday afternoon, my crew, Team Columbia, began training for our Alpha Mission, the first of three missions we would participate in throughout the weekend. I received the role of CAPCOM, meaning my responsibilities were communicating with my teammates on the Space Shuttle Enterprise to make sure they were completing all their assigned tasks. As an English major with a non-engineer brain, I admit that when we were given our instruction manuals and headsets, my heart pounded as I tried desperately to grasp all the astronaut terms, abbreviations, and numerals I had to relay to my team members.

However, by the end of the mission, I could effectively read out the roll, pitch, and yaw to the pilot and copilot as well as communicate them the steps to fix an anomaly—something to add to my resume.

I read in a memoir by Chris Hadfield, seasoned astronaut and former commander of the International Space Station, that he received so many years of training and acting out worst-case scenarios that when he was finally locked in place ready for launch, he felt relief rather than nerves. What an accomplishment to reach that point.

On Saturday, our team completed two more missions, the Bravo Mission, as well as the Charlie Mission, which involved the Orion capsule and the International Space Station, the largest structure ever constructed in Earth's orbit. For these missions, I held the role of a Mission Specialist and was responsible for performing EVAS (extravehicular activities). Under the glow of eerie blue lights, I donned a giant space suit, crawled through a hole to exit the shuttle, became attached to a harness, and then flew across a thin wire to fetch a spare antenna for a satellite I had been assigned to repair. No big deal.

During a spacewalk, an astronaut travels about 17,500 miles per hour. While I didn't move quite this fast, I zipped around in that spacesuit like a pro, despite accidentally dropping an antenna into the depths of space. These shuttle missions taught me that every equipment check, every task, every command relayed and carried out, every toggle flipped and switch pressed are vital to all crew members' survival. Without teamwork and precision, these missions could not be carried out.

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The camp ended on Sunday with a Space Bowl Jeopardy game to test our knowledge, our rocket launch, and an official graduation ceremony where we were given certificates and patches. While I didn't morph into a rocket scientist or astronaut upon graduation (although several space camp alumni have gone on to become astronauts, so I can't rule it out), I realized I can take on tasks presented to me despite pressure and level of difficulty. It's a lesson I never thought I would learn while wearing a headset, harness, and bulky spacesuit, but one that I am quite thankful for.

Everyone in Alabama should make the drive to Huntsville to visit the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. It's important to understand the milestones in space exploration that are occurring right down the road. Marvel at the rockets. Meet a scientist. Get up close to a moon rock or a tank fragment from Skylab. Read the pressure the Apollo astronauts faced getting back to earth. Eat freeze-dried food and ride the astronaut simulators like you are 10 years old again. Dive into the history of space discovery and the incredible manpower it took to get us there. And be sure to study what's next.

Space exploration reveals the true depths of our curiosity and thirst for knowledge of what lies beyond our planet. I recommend Adult Space Academy for anyone looking to gain a small taste of the training astronauts are willing to undergo to discover those truths. It's probably better than what your friends have planned this weekend anyway. ●

For more information, visit spacecamp.com/space/adult.