

New Scientist

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BREAKING DOWN CONSCIOUSNESS

Anil Seth on how the greatest mystery will finally be solved

STRANGE WAVES

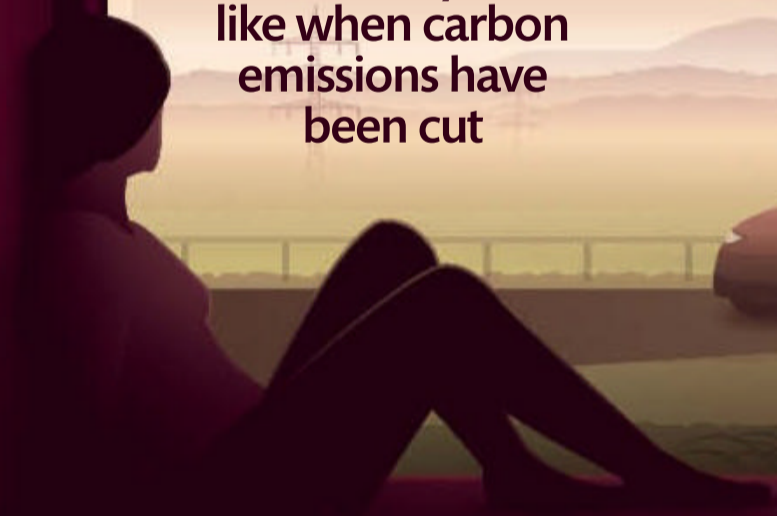
Could space-time ripples reveal quantum gravity?

MEAN STREAK

The surprising upsides of acting out of spite

YOUR NET ZERO LIFE

What our lives will actually look like when carbon emissions have been cut



COVID'S ORIGINS

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A team effort

The International Space Station is a marvel to behold and a new documentary speaks to those who have lived on board, finds **Abigail Beall**



Film
The Wonderful: Stories from the space station

Clare Lewins

Universal

OVER 20 years ago, five space agencies representing 15 countries came together to build one of the most ambitious engineering projects the world had ever seen. It took more than 30 missions, with parts manufactured thousands of kilometres apart and assembled by spacewalkers orbiting at 28,000 kilometres per hour, before the International Space Station (ISS) was completed in November 2000.

But *The Wonderful* – a documentary celebrating the ISS – isn't an engineering story. It is the story of the people who have made the space station their home in the decades since it was first occupied, and the story of their loved ones back on Earth. Since it was first

occupied, there has never been a day when there wasn't someone living on the ISS.

From the crew who assembled the space station to its most recent inhabitants, this documentary explores the lives of those who have been involved in the ISS since the beginning. Punctuated with music and recordings of Earth from space, the night sky or training facilities, *The Wonderful* tells the story of the ISS through those who have been most involved with it.

Many of those interviewed dreamed of going into space since childhood, when looking at the night sky sparked their imagination, but it wasn't always plain sailing. When Ginger Kerrick's dreams of becoming an astronaut were dashed after NASA discovered she had kidney stones, she instead trained astronauts to prepare for their missions and supported the first crew to fly on the space station – she was there with them until take-off.

Astronaut Peggy Whitson spent 10 years applying to become an astronaut until she was finally selected. She went on to spend 665 days in space in her career – more than any other NASA astronaut.

Some didn't share this childhood dream. Sergey Volkov describes how growing up with his father, the cosmonaut Aleksandr Volkov, made him think going into space was "heroic and difficult".

"In all the years since it launched, there has never been a day when there wasn't someone living on the ISS"

Many years later, Aleksandr was surprised to learn of his son joining the Russian space agency, Roscosmos, through reading the case files of those selected for the physical assessment.

Pictures and videos can help us understand what it is like to be in space, but nothing quite

encapsulates the full experience like hearing it first-hand. In *The Wonderful*, it is the added details that bring life on the ISS to life. Scott Kelly remarks on the vibrant colours he could see when his vision wasn't altered by the air, Tim Peake describes the sensation of silence slowly creeping up on him when he made his way into the vacuum of space for his spacewalk, and Samantha Cristoforetti describes seeing the space station up close for the first time.

Behind every astronaut living 400 kilometres above Earth's surface, there are people on the ground missing them. *The Wonderful* gives us a glimpse of what it is like when your loved ones are floating above your head. NASA astronaut Cady Coleman's husband, Josh Simpson, describes hearing from his wife every night, before going outside with their son Jamey to look up and see the ISS whizzing by overhead.

While everyone's experience of space is different, something that seems to bring those who have been there together is a realisation of how fragile the planet is. A few people in the film mention their surprise at the size of the atmosphere compared with the planet, which Kelly describes as like a contact lens on someone's eye.

While climate change isn't explicitly mentioned, it is difficult not to make a comparison between the feat of science and engineering being celebrated in *The Wonderful* and the challenge facing Earth today. But the story of success that is the space station leaves the viewer with hope that, when working together, humans can do great things. ■

Astronaut Scott Kelly performing a spacewalk during his time on the ISS



NASA