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Autor: Rutz, Eveline
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The Swiss heading into space

Marco Sieber has achieved what many children dream of. He is being trained to become an astronaut. Sieber, a qualified doctor who grew up in Burgdorf, is keen for space flight to gain greater exposure in Switzerland again.

EVELINE RUTZ

The news spread like wildfire: Switzerland has a new astronaut. On 23 November 2022, the European Space Agency (ESA) presented its new team of astronauts, which includes five career astronauts and 12 reserve astronauts. One of the crew who appeared on stage was career astronaut Marco Sieber from Burgdorf (canton of Berne). The 33-year-old Sieber, who was selected from over 22,500 fellow applicants, told the media that space had fascinated him from a young age

naturally inquisitive person with a thirst for knowledge. Certainly, Sieber's career to date is impressive. He most recently worked as a helicopter rescue emergency medical doctor before holding the position of urologist at Biel Hospital. Sieber is a para scout in the Swiss army and previously worked as chief medical officer with KFOR, the NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Kosovo. He holds a private pilot licence and enjoys ski touring, paragliding, scuba diving, and kitesurfing in his free time.

or to the Moon. The ESA wants to send one of the new members of its astronaut corps into space in 2026 at the earliest.

Switzerland is a founder member of the ESA, which it helps to fund. Its financial contribution for the years 2023 to 2025 will amount to 600 million Swiss francs. "We are a trusted partner for the space industry and can offer a great deal of expertise," says Sieber, adding that his involvement will allow space flight to gain greater exposure in Switzerland again.

Sieber is following in the footsteps of Claude Nicollier, the first Swiss in space. Starting in 1992, Nicollier took part in four NASA shuttle missions and notably repaired the Hubble telescope on a space walk. The pictures of Nicollier in space and the words of then Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi ("Joy abounds!") remain etched in the mind.

Nicollier is delighted at the prospect of someone flying the flag for Switzerland in space again and believes that Sieber will be an inspiration not least to young people. "He will become a linchpin in training the next generation of Swiss in the areas of science, technology and mathematics." Becoming an astronaut is hard, says the 78-year-old. "You have to take in an awful lot of detailed information." But doing so is also "a pleasure and a privilege".

After completing his basic training, Marco Sieber will remain in Cologne initially. As soon as he is nominated for a mission, he will have to do further, more specific training either at NASA in the United States, or in a different ISS partner country. "But that's still a long way off," he says.



New career astronaut Marco Sieber at the ESA presentation ceremony on 23 November in Paris. Photo: Sebastiaan ter Brug, Utrecht, Wikimedia commons

and that he used to build model space rockets with his brother. He was now fulfilling a childhood dream.

Sieber has relocated to Cologne in the meantime, where he will begin 12 months of basic training in April at the ESA's European Astronaut Centre. "I look forward to everything that awaits," he said, adding that he is a

In Cologne, Sieber will now learn about the set-up and workings of the International Space Station (ISS). Among other things, he will do survival training and take Russian lessons. Russian is the other official language on board the ISS in addition to English. Sieber's first space mission could eventually take him to the ISS –

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