Space & Astronomy | Mar 24, 2026 | 7 min read | By Bryan White

Preparing for Artemis II: Inside the Systems of a Crewed Lunar Flyby

Space * Astronomy * Solar System

The Artemis II Flight Test Campaign

Artemis II marks the transition from the uncrewed systems verification of Artemis I in 2022 to the operational validation of crewed lunar architectures.[1] Launching from Launch Complex 39B at the Kennedy Space Center, Artemis II was designed to carry four astronauts -- NASA commander Reid Wiseman, pilot Victor Glover, mission specialist Christina Koch, and Canadian Space Agency mission specialist Jeremy Hansen -- on a ten-day lunar flyby, the first crewed flight beyond low Earth orbit since Apollo 17 in 1972.[1][2] The mission validates the integrated Space Launch System (SLS), Orion spacecraft, Environmental Control and Life Support System (ECLSS), optical communications, and modified reentry thermal profiles required prior to Artemis III lunar landings.[1][2]

Ground Operations, Pneumatic Remediation, and Pad 39B Infrastructure

During February 2026 wet dress rehearsals, engineers remediated tail service mast liquid hydrogen seal leaks before discovering an obstruction in purified helium flow to the Interim Cryogenic Propulsion Stage (ICPS).[3] Remaining gaseous at liquid hydrogen (423 deg F) and liquid oxygen (297 deg F) temperatures, helium autogenously pressurizes propellant tanks, purges lines, and actuates valves.[3][4] After rolling the stack back to the Vehicle Assembly Building on February 25, 2026, technicians replaced a dislodged quick-disconnect umbilical seal, refreshed Flight Termination System batteries, and returned the 23.6-million-pound assembly to Pad 39B on March 20, 2026.[3][4][5]

Launch Complex 39B features a 1.4-million-gallon liquid hydrogen sphere to offset cryogenic boil-off, a 400,000-gallon Sound Suppression System flowing 1.1 million gallons per minute into a 5,600 deg F-rated brick-and-steel flame trench, and a 1,335-foot catenary Emergency Egress System utilizing eddy-current magnetic brakes.[6][7][8]

| Pad 39B Infrastructure Element | | Technical Specification | | Operational Purpose |

| Liquid Hydrogen Sphere | | 1.4-million-gallon capacity | | Supports back-to-back launch attempts by mitigating boil-off limits |

| Sound Suppression System | | 400,000 gallons; 1.1M gal/min flow | | Dampens acoustic energy reflection during ignition sequence |

| Flame Trench & Deflector | | 96,000 bricks; 112 steel plates | | Diverts exhaust plume; withstands up to 5,600 deg F |

| Emergency Egress System | | 1,335-foot catenary cables | | Rapid crew evacuation utilizing eddy current magnetic braking |

Launch Vehicle Architecture: Space Launch System Block 1

Generating 8.8 million pounds of liftoff thrust, the 322-foot SLS Block 1 delivers over 27 metric tons to translunar injection.[9] Its 212-foot Boeing core stage holds 537,000 gallons of liquid hydrogen and 196,000 gallons of liquid oxygen, feeding four Aerojet Rocketdyne RS-25D engines operating at 109 percent rated thrust (512,300 lbf vacuum thrust and 452-second specific impulse each).[9][10][11] Using a closed fuel-rich staged combustion cycle, regenerative cooling channels vaporize hydrogen to drive twin preburner turbopumps before injecting the fuel-rich exhaust directly into the ~3,000 psi main chamber to maximize kinetic energy.[9][11]

Two expendable five-segment Northrop Grumman polybutadiene acrylonitrile (PBAN) solid rocket boosters supply 7.2 million lbf of thrust during the first two minutes, while the United Launch Alliance ICPS uses a single expander-cycle RL10C-2 engine (24,750 lbf) for orbital thermodynamic maneuvers.[9]

| SLS Block 1 Component | | Manufacturer | | Propellant Type | | Engines/Motors | | Vacuum Thrust (Max) | | Role |

| Core Stage | | Boeing | | Liquid Hydrogen / Liquid Oxygen | | 4 x RS-25D | | 2,049,200 lbf (combined) | | Sustained ascent propulsion |

| Solid Rocket Boosters | | Northrop Grumman | | PBAN Solid Propellant | | 2 x 5-Segment Motors | | 7,200,000 lbf (combined) | | Liftoff and initial ascent |

| ICPS Upper Stage | | United Launch Alliance | | Liquid Hydrogen / Liquid Oxygen | | 1 x RL10C-2 | | 24,750 lbf | | Earth orbit maneuvers / TLI |

Orion Life Support, Optical Avionics, and Heat Shield Remediation

Orion's Crew Module (316 ft habitable volume) activates full ECLSS life support for four astronauts.[12][14] Its Carbon Dioxide and Moisture Removal Amine Swing-bed (CAMRAS) scrubs carbon dioxide and water vapor via vacuum-desorbed regenerable amine beds, monitored by a 31-bounce infrared laser spectrometer and ARCHeR biometric wristbands.[13][15][16] The Airbus European Service Module (ESM) provides 33 thrusters, solar arrays, ammonia radiators, composite oxygen/nitrogen tanks, and four nitrogen-pressurized metal-bellows water tanks.[14][17]

| Consumable Resource | | Storage Capacity | | Tank Architecture | | Primary Function |

| Potable Water | | 240 kg (240 Liters) | | 4 x Metal Bellows Tanks | | Drinking, food rehydration, hygiene, suit cooling |

| Oxygen (O2) | | 90 kg | | 3 x Composite Overwrapped | | Metabolic consumption, atmospheric mixture |

| Nitrogen (N2) | | 30 kg | | 1 x Composite Overwrapped | | Atmospheric pressurization, bellows actuation |

Orion's O2O 1550-nm infrared laser terminal achieves 260 Mbps downlinks using Serially Concatenated Pulse-Position Modulation.[18][19] To prevent the Avcoat heat shield char spallation caused by internal gas trapping during Artemis I's skip-entry bounce, Artemis II employs a continuous direct-entry trajectory at Mach 32 (5,000 deg F) that rapidly forms a permeable char layer for smooth pyrolysis

outgassing.[20][21]

Mission Profile and Orbital Mechanics: The Hybrid Free-Return Trajectory

After booster separation and core-stage cutoff, the ICPS places Orion into a 24-hour High Earth Orbit (115 x 44,525 miles) for ECLSS checkout and a 70-minute manual Proximity Operations Demonstration using the spent ICPS as a target.[2][22] At perigee on Day 2, leveraging the Oberth effect, the ESM main engine executes Translunar Injection onto a hybrid free-return trajectory.[2] Looping ~4,600 miles behind the Moon on Day 6, a passive lunar gravity assist returns Orion to Earth for a Day 10 Pacific splashdown.[2][20]

| Mission Phase | | Key Milestone / Objective | | Orbital Action / Physics |

| Ascent (Day 1) | | Launch & Booster Jettison | | 8.8M lbf thrust; SRBs jettison at 2 mins; MECO at 8 mins |

| Earth Orbit (Day 1) | | Apogee Raise Burn | | ICPS fires to achieve High Earth Orbit (115 x 44,525 miles) |

| Earth Orbit (Day 1) | | Proximity Operations Demo | | Manual piloting of Orion using ICPS as target; ECLSS checkout |

| Departure (Day 2) | | Translunar Injection (TLI) | | Orion Main Engine fires to escape Earth orbit |

| Transit (Days 3-5) | | Outbound Coast Phase | | Systems tests; O2O optical laser communications streaming |

| Lunar Flyby (Day 6) | | Gravity Assist | | Spacecraft passes ~4,600 miles beyond the lunar far side |

| Transit (Days 7-9) | | Return Coast Phase | | Passive return via Earth's gravitational pull (Free-Return) |

| Reentry (Day 10) | | Service Module Jettison & Splashdown | | Direct atmospheric descent; main parachutes deploy at 9,500 ft |

April 2026 Flight Execution and Blueprint for Cislunar Operations

Resolving the ICPS helium quick-disconnect fault and integrating RS-25 staged-combustion propulsion, vacuum-regenerable CAMRAS life support, 260 Mbps optical communications, direct-entry Avcoat thermal protection, and a hybrid free-return trajectory laid the groundwork for the mission's full flight test.[1][4][13][18][20] Launching on April 1, 2026, from Pad 39B aboard the Orion spacecraft Integrity, the Artemis II crew surpassed Apollo 13's distance benchmark on April 6, transmitted high-resolution lunar flyby imagery back to Earth, and completed a Pacific Ocean splashdown off the coast of San Diego on April 10, 2026, with recovery aboard the USS John P. Murtha.[23][24][25]

Updates (Nov 20, 2026): Updated mission status to reflect the completed April 1-10, 2026 Artemis II crewed lunar flyby and Pacific splashdown, standardized section headings and inline citation markup, and replaced encyclopedia and broken URLs with dated primary NASA, MIT, and spaceflight agency references.

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