

Is This The Way To...?

Some believe that technology started when man first struck a block of stone with a pebble to shape from it the Neolithic axe. Some believe it has now reached its ultimate form in the shape of free downloadable Internet pornography. Whatever the truth of these two opinions, technology *has* now given us the capability to reach for the stars and beyond. What once seemed like journeys of unimaginable distance are now no more than a mere space-hopper bounce through the twinkling ether. And this same technology has even provided failsafe equipment to help us navigate those interstellar enormities as well. We live, to coin a cliché, in exciting times.

So thought Dave Lambert as, seated at the gleaming controls of the UK's first space shuttle, he piloted her on Earth's maiden manned voyage to the planet Mars. Twenty-seven years he'd been training for this moment, man and boy. Almost from within the womb he'd been selected for top-level schooling at NASA – the North Acton Space Academy. And now, as he swung a left round a Stop-Go meteor by some spaceworks on the heavenly equivalent of the A42, he truly was living in his own exciting times.

Reaching for a boiled sweet from the tin on the dashboard in front of him, he glanced across at the troubled face of his co-pilot. "Penny for them, Jim," he demanded.

Jim Docherty continued to frown as he stooped to examine the miniature display unit suckered onto the spaceship's windscreen. Before he could collect his penny, however, a voice cut in from a tiny grill at the back of the monitor. "In three thousand miles, turn left," it said in a pleasant, though mono-tonal, mock-female voice.

Jim's frown deepened. "Left in three thousand? Are you sure that's the way to Mars?"

"Turn left now," the monitor followed up its previous instruction. Dave swung them round onto the prescribed course. "Must be," he countered his partner's concern. "SatNavs are never wrong, you know."

Jim refused to be pacified. "Granted, normally. But have they ever been tried out anywhere this side of Watford Gap before?"

"In two thousand miles, at the asteroid, take the third exit," the little device trilled. Jim scowled closer at it.

"Stop worrying," Dave grinned across at him again. "These things are accurate to the nth degree."

"Yes, but..." Jim began, and clutched at his seatbelt as Dave carried out the SatNav's instruction to "Take the third exit now".

"I don't see..." he began again, but was interrupted by, "Destination in five thousand miles." Both men peered ahead. Sure enough, a planet stared back at them, rushing to meet them at 17,000 miles per hour. "There you are," Dave said, leaning back in his chair. "No worries."

"Hmm, I'm not so sure," Jim muttered, but more to himself than to the other. Dave settled back to mentally write the acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize he was bound to be getting once they'd returned home.

In twenty minutes or so the planet duly arrived, and with use of thrusters and air brakes practised over countless hours in a flight simulator, Dave manoeuvred the ship into a perfect landing. "We've arrived," he announced triumphantly. "Welcome to Mars."

At first, he was so busy receiving his now nailed-on knighthood, he failed to notice that Jim's face, habitually inclined towards an expression of puzzlement, had reached beyond that and was now registering total bewilderment. Then, as Her Majesty uttered the glorious expression "Arise, Sir David", he turned his head to follow the other's gaze.

Outside the windscreen, rather than the brick-red dust bowl he'd anticipated, another sight entirely met his eyes. The planet, yes, was brick-red. But why, he wondered, was this brick-red being

daubed onto what looked very much like the inside walls of a building by a bloke wearing overalls and wielding a paint-brush?

And then, as he stared further, figures scurried in and out of view, some carrying familiar-looking objects, others pushing what looked like metallic trolleys with those familiar-looking objects piled up on them. "Turn the audio up, Jim, will you?" he muttered.

Jim complied, and a busy hum of clattering footsteps, metal clanging and burbling chatter filled the shuttle's cockpit. From somewhere, a mechanical "bing bong" sounded, and an echoey voice announced, "This is Terminal Three, Manchester Airport. The next flight boarding..."

Dave leaned over and clicked the speaker off. Then he repeated the movement to turn off the small screen that had led them there. Turning to his colleague, he asked, "Did I spot a map-book in the glove compartment there?"