

A Milestone for Europe: ESA Plans to Send a German Astronaut to the Moon

The European Space Agency (ESA) made a groundbreaking decision at its Ministerial Council meeting in late November 2025 in Bremen: **The first European to fly on an upcoming Moon mission will be a German astronaut.** This marks a major step in Europe's participation in NASA's Artemis lunar program. [1]

ESA Director General Josef Aschbacher announced: "I have decided that the first Europeans to fly on a Moon mission will be ESA astronauts of German, French, and Italian nationality. Germany will go first."

Germany's space minister, Dorothee Bär, reaffirmed the decision and emphasized that Germany is taking a leading role in the new era of human lunar exploration.

As Editor of the Journal of SpaceOperations & Communicator I asked ChatGPT to research for more background information

Why Now — and Why Germany?

ESA & Artemis: A Strategic Partnership

- ESA plays a crucial role in NASA's Artemis program by providing the **European Service Module (ESM)** for the Orion spacecraft. Without this module, Orion cannot fly — making Germany a key contributor behind the missions.
- ESA is also participating in the Gateway project, a lunar-orbiting space station that aims to establish a long-term international presence around the Moon.

Political and Financial Momentum

- The ESA Ministerial Council approved a substantial budget increase: over the next three years, ESA's total budget will rise to **€22.1 billion**. Germany significantly increases its share — from roughly €3.5 billion to €5 billion.
- Against this backdrop, choosing a German astronaut for the first European lunar mission is not just symbolic: it reflects Germany's ambition to lead the future of space exploration.

Who Could It Be — and When?

- **No name yet:** ESA has not yet announced which German astronaut will fly. The timeline also remains open.
- **Likely candidates:** Two experienced astronauts are seen as strong possibilities: Alexander Gerst (49) and Matthias Maurer (55). Both have expressed interest and have flown long-duration missions on the International Space Station.
- **When is the launch likely?**
 - The next mission, Artemis II, is planned for **spring 2026**, carrying four astronauts (U.S. and Canada) on a roughly ten-day lunar flyby — but current plans do *not* include Europeans.
 - A Moon landing is currently expected with Artemis III in **2027 or 2028**. A German astronaut is expected to join a later mission — potentially Artemis IV or beyond.

ESA has described the mission as happening "in a few years" — with details such as flight assignment, mission profile (orbit or surface), and timing still to be determined.

Germany Is Contributing More Than Astronauts: Infrastructure & Industry

Germany is not just sending someone to the Moon — it is helping build the systems behind the missions:

- In Cologne, ESA and the German Aerospace Center (DLR) operate the **LUNA analog facility**, a training hall with simulated lunar terrain for astronaut and robotic mission preparation.
- ESA's control center in Oberpfaffenhofen near Munich is being expanded to support future Moon and Gateway operations as a Moon mission control center, the **Human Exploration Control Center (HECC)**.
- German industry — particularly Airbus in Bremen — is heavily involved in building key components, including the European Service Module.

This positions Germany as a central hub of Europe's lunar infrastructure — not just a passenger.

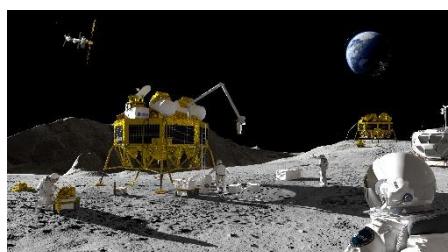
Outlook: What Does This Mean for Europe?

- **A historic signal:** No European has set foot on the Moon since the Apollo era. This decision marks the beginning of a truly European presence beyond Earth orbit.
- **A model for international cooperation:** The close collaboration among ESA, DLR, European industry, and NASA highlights that global partnerships are the future of space exploration.
- **Long-term innovation:** Projects such as Gateway, the service module, the LUNA training center, and mission control expansion with the HECC show that lunar exploration is evolving into a sustainable, long-term infrastructure effort.

Conclusion

ESA's decision to send a German astronaut as the first European on a Moon mission is more than symbolic: it signals the beginning of a new chapter in European spaceflight. Germany is taking a leading role — technologically, organizationally, operationally and politically. The coming years will be exciting: Who will become the first German to travel toward the Moon? And when exactly will the launch take place?

What *is* clear is that Europe is stepping forward — ready not just to watch, but to help shape humanity's return to the Moon with its *Argonaut Program*.



*The European Space Agency (ESA) lunar lander program, **Argonaut**, represents Europe's autonomous, versatile and reliable access to the Moon. From the 2030s, Argonaut landers will be launched on four-booster Ariane 6 rockets to deliver cargo to the Moon's surface, supporting robotic and crewed missions .[3]*

References:

- [1] https://www.esa.int/About_Us/Ministerial_Council_2025
- [2] Main body of the article composed by ChatGPT, verified by the Editor.
- [3] Argonaut Program
https://www.esa.int/Science_Exploration/Human_and_Robotic_Exploration/Exploration/Argonaut_Europe_s_lunar_lander_programme