

Onwards and upwards

A letter sent from the highest post office on Earth to the highest post office above Earth started its journey on foot, and completed it in a spacecraft

■ Report by Gerhard Freund



I enjoy creating spectacular postal history by sending mail between extreme locations.

My previous projects have included posting covers from the world's northernmost post office at Ny Alesund (Spitsbergen, Norway), the world's southernmost civil post office at Port Lockroy (British Antarctic Territory), and the Amundsen-Scott Station, the research centre at the South Pole.

ABOVE: Cover from the Himalayas to the International Space Station, photographed in the ISS cupola with an incomparable view of planet Earth

My latest idea was to send a letter from the highest post office on Earth to the highest post office above Earth.

Himalayan heights

The highest post office on Earth is located in the Himalayas, at an altitude of 4,400m.

To be precise, it is in the mountain village of Hikkim, in the Lahaul & Spiti district of the

state of Himachal Pradesh in northern India.

One of the highest places in India that is inhabited all year round, it is 29 miles (46km) from the nearest town, Kaza. It is accessible only by a gravel road in summer, and cut off from the outside world for six months each year due to heavy winter snowfall.

What connects Hikkim with the rest of the world is its post office,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH APPELT

which not only sends letters and parcels in and out but also operates a savings bank for the villagers.

It is also a magnet for tourists, who delight on sending postcards with its postmark and souvenir cachet.

Space oddity

The highest post office above the planet is of course to be found on the International Space Station, the artificial satellite which has been permanently inhabited since 2000.

In low Earth orbit at an average altitude of 250 miles (400km),

completing 15 orbits each day at a speed of 17,000mph, the ISS is the largest artificial object in space.

It is divided into two segments, one operated by Russia and the other by the United States, and the post office is located in the Russian segment.

Terrestrial post

Helping me to realise this project was Sarah Appelt, a German who runs the Chalo Reisen travel agency in India. She likes to explore the country by mountain bike, and I asked her to post two

ABOVE: The post office in the remote village of Hikkim is an unassuming building, but well signposted as the highest in the world

letters for me on her next trip to Hikkim.

Sarah started out on September 9, 2021, riding the 46km (and 600m in altitude) from Kaza to Hikkim and arriving two days later.

Addressed to Moscow in Russia, both letters were franked with six India 5r stamps portraying Jawaharlal Nehru. They were handed to Rinchen Chhering, who has been the postmaster at Hikkim since the post office was founded in 1983.

He cancelled them with the regular Hikkim/Lahaul Spiti



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ABOVE: The postmaster at Hikkim, Rinchen Chhering, postmarks letters (on the floor!) with the village handstamp and a special 'World's Highest Post Office' cachet, to which he adds his signature for additional authentication

ABOVE: Sarah Appelt posts the author's letters in Hikkim's rudimentary postbox

EXTREME POSTAL HISTORY

handstamp, dated September 11, and also added the 'India Post/World's Highest Post Office' cachet, with his signature above it.

Space post

Posted by Sarah in the postbox outside, the letters started their remarkable journey on foot to Kaza, continued by bus along hazardous mountain roads.

They arrived in Moscow on October 20, where they were delivered to my second go-between, the well-known space mail collector Igor Rodin, who handed them over to the 'postmen' for the last leg of their voyage.

The letters were taken on board the Soyuz MS-20 spacecraft which was flying to the ISS on December 8, 2021, crewed by the Russian cosmonaut Misurkin Aleksandrovich and two Japanese space tourists, Maezawa Yusaku and Hirano Yozo.

Launched from the spaceport in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, at 07:38 Universal Time (UTC), the spaceship successfully docked with the ISS at 13:40.

Out of this world

Once on board, the covers received a circular datestamp of December 8 inscribed (in Cyrillic) 'Russia Post', 'Moscow 101000', 'ISS Post' and 'Russian Segment'; the transcripton of ISS appears as 'MKC'.

They were also given two pictorial ISS cachets in blue, one circular and the other octagonal.

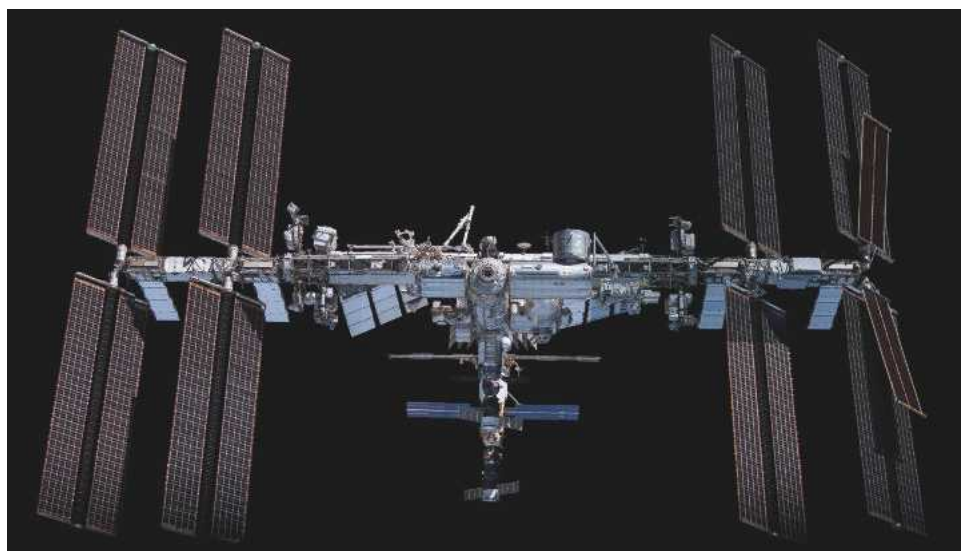
The covers enclosed a letter from me to the crew, informing them about my project, and these were also treated with the postmark and cachets.

Additional evidence of their postal journey comes by way of photographs kindly taken by a crewman within the cupola of the ISS, a dome-shaped observatory built by the European Space Agency. A cover can be seen floating weightlessly in front of a spectacular view of planet Earth.

Back to earth

Soyuz MS-20 undocked from the ISS on December 19 at 23:50 UTC, and landed back on Earth at 15:13 UTC, carrying my covers.

During their short time on board the ISS, in 11 days in orbit around the planet, they had travelled almost five million miles. ■



ABOVE: The International Space Station is the largest artificial object in space, and has been permanently inhabited since 2000, with a post office in the Russian segment



ABOVE: Cover from India to the ISS, datestamped at Hikkim on September 11, 2021, and on the ISS on December 8, with the special cachets of each post office

'The highest post office of all is to be found on the International Space Station, in low Earth orbit at an altitude of 250 miles'



RIGHT: Enclosed letter from the author to the crew of the ISS, also featuring the datestamp and cachets