

# Let's stay this time

*NASA unveils plans for a return trip to the Moon. Going back won't have much meaning, however, unless it is to establish a permanent human presence.*

It appears your species may be going back to the future after NASA pulled back the curtain

## Worldview by

Guy P. Harrison [guy@cfp.ky](mailto:guy@cfp.ky)

last week and showed off details of their plan to land on the Moon—again. The project could be derailed, of course, but it looks promising.

NASA intends to return to the Moon

Apollo style, using a “crew exploration vehicle” that looks a lot like the old Apollo command module, a “lander” that looks a lot like the Apollo lunar module, and a capsule with a heat shield for Earth re-entry, just like Apollo.

The plan gives a target year of 2018 for the first of a series of lunar landings and a price tag of \$104 billion spread over 13 years to do it. NASA chief Michael Griffin described the project as “Apollo on steroids.” He says the money will come from the agency’s existing budget and important unmanned exploration efforts will not be sacrificed. There is enough on the table now to begin believing this may actually happen. After more than 35 years of staying on the porch in Earth orbit, we may finally get back out there.

Hopefully, if this plan is allowed to proceed all the way, these landings won’t be mere hit and run efforts. It won’t be enough just to go back. We need to go and stay. It is time for humankind to scratch out a permanent foothold in space. Anything short of that will lack much meaning.

**Why we need a second home.** Right now we are a one-world species. While that might have seemed adequate when we howled at the Moon and thought making fire was a big deal, we know a lot more now. There are a number of scary events that can wipe us out so long as we keep all our eggs in one basket. These include: an asteroid strike, supervolcanoes, an unstoppable virus, all-out nuclear war between countries with massive arsenals, and—believe it or not—gigantic methane burps from the ocean floor. Any one of



‘Apollo on steroids’ Artist’s rendition of NASA’s next lunar mission. Image: NASA

these scenarios could mean extinction for us. Some of them are inevitable given enough time, say many scientists. Once we establish a permanent human presence on another world, however, we double our chances of long-term survival. While this may seem silly from the perspective of a single lifetime, in the context of centuries or thousands of years it is idiotic not to consider these threats.

I like the idea of humankind living on for millions, maybe billions, of years to come. I want to believe that the *Caymanian Compass* newspaper will be studied by cyborg anthropologists in the distant future as they attempt to understand the primitive and bizarre minds of their 21st century ancestors. Don’t you agree that it would be tragic for the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare and Dr. Seuss to be erased in the blink of an eye by a purposeless hunk of rock that just happened to hit the Earth? If I care enough to back up family photos on a CD, shouldn’t we all care enough to back up human culture?

**Apollo’s lasting glory.** One glance at NASA’s new Moon shot plan makes it clear that the Apollo boys nailed it way back in the 1960s. This will, of course, be bigger and better with vastly updated computer technology, but the vehicles are all very familiar and the whole approach to getting there and back is textbook Apollo. After all these years, the brilliant minds of those who imagined and executed the Apollo programme still shine.

**Money.** There will always be those who mistakenly believe that sending humans out into space is an extravagantly

expensive ego trip and a case of misplaced priorities. Yes, playing on the Moon at a cost of \$104 billion seems expensive when viewed in isolation. That view changes fast, however, when you compare space exploration to what the world spends on war (\$950 billion per year) or how much is spent on costs related to smoking (more than \$70 billion per year in the US

alone). If humankind has that much money to burn on napalm and cigarettes then our species certainly can afford to build a city on the Moon.

If the world’s wealthy nations ever decided to change their spending habits in order to do something decent like feed the hungry or educate all the world’s children, it would be no challenge to produce a list of about a thousand things that can and should be sacrificed long before we give up on space.

**Closed eyes.** It is not surprising that many people fail to feel the tug of space. Sadly, most people still do not even think of the entire Earth as their home, much less the solar system, the Milky Way or the universe. They imagine themselves as nothing more than members of tribes called nations that somehow float apart from the realities of the planet and universe. If this is the extent of their vision, how can they possibly see the universe as home?

Nevertheless, the truth is that the universe is our home. We live in it. It touches us every moment. The blurry edge of an atmosphere is not a wall. We are not imprisoned by gravity. We can extend our reach beyond this one planet and we should. Nothing restricts us in this except for limitations of imagination and courage. Space is our home, too. Let’s live there.

Visit [Guy P. Harrison’s educational website for Cayman’s children](http://www.spaceguy.8k.com). It’s all about space and includes facts, photos, as well as several of Guy’s interviews with *Gemini*, *Apollo* and space shuttle astronauts. It’s at [www.spaceguy.8k.com](http://www.spaceguy.8k.com)