Terra Novus

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James Ford, News21 reporter, talks about his time spent on Terra Novus, the first world visited outside of the Sol System.

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Sitting in the first class lounge aboard the USS Surveyor, the view of Terra Novus was superb, the azure seas contrasting with the vivid greens and sharp browns of the land masses, impressive weather systems worked their way across the surface, towering cumulonimbus clouds in the thick atmosphere, tinted red by the nearby star, the odd flash of lightning from a hurricane in the tropical band. Terra Novus. The first world mankind discovered when it started to send out its survey ships, and one of the most hospitable planets found since. Terra Novus orbited a red dwarf star 19.3 light years from the Sol system. It was said that the crew of the first ship to discover it initially thought their nav systems had led them back home to Earth, but when their systems picked up the massive reddish brown star, realized they'd discovered something special. After having traveled through what was essentially empty space for ten long years, the discovery of the planet was more than they could've ever hoped for. The parent star, BD-38950, later dubbed "Nuevo", was one of many red dwarfs in the region near Sol, each survey ship was given one star to explore, and then return home to Earth, USS Surveyor was given 38950.

Anyway, that's all common knowledge, everyone on all the populated planets of the Sol system knows that, but no hologram could prepare you for actually seeing Terra Novus, even nowadays, this long after it was discovered, very few people travel to the world. It's one of the few planets where bases aren't allowed on the surface, in fact, no human has ever touched the ground. Scientists think the risks are too large, fearing that we might contaminate the soil, so all the research stations float high in the atmosphere, ocasionally sending sterilised rovers down to the surface. Tourism had boomed after the discovery of the world, but more exotic planets had claimed most of the tourist market, though a few hotels are still adrift in the skies. In the twenty years since the USS Surveyor returned to Sol with the news of Terra Novus, warp technology has advanced drastically, the Surveyor was retired from exploration duties, and used as a testbed for new propulsion tech, eventually getting the travel time from Sol to Nuevo down to just three days. With that, the Surveyor had a role change once again, being turned into a passenger and cargo freighter, with two forward decks used for paying visitors and scientists, and the aft decks used for transporting vital goods, bases, and general cargo. It was my second time riding onboard the old beast, having rode out on it about two months prior to cover a groundbreaking discovery from one of the floating bases, I was meant to have flown back in a few days, but due to more and more information coming to light, News21 decided to keep me out there for two solid months. Going in, I felt like I couldn't get off the Surveyor quickly enough, excited to finally step foot on a floating station, to see Terra Novus up close, but now, as the ship headed for the accelerator rings, I was enjoying every minute of the soft bunk, the crisp, clean sheets, and the filtered, lightly fragranced air. I felt like this trip was going to be far too short.

The rings slipped past the window, faster and faster, until the two kilometer wide pieces of metal were a solid blur, and then suddenly, yet smoothly, nothing, just a deep black, no stars, nothing. Warp. It never failed to disturb me when a ship hit warp, knowing that you're shifting faster than the speed of light, something just sixty years ago was thought to be pure science fiction, and now it's doable, all whilst sitting in pure luxury. Some people claim to be used to it, but I find that hard to believe. The feeling usually passes in a few hours, and with so many things to distract a person, it's usually shorter than that.

For those that aren't as up to date on warp tech, the rings are an integral part of the modern warp drive, especially on smaller ships like the Surveyor. Because the modern drives are so compact, yet produce such performance, they require massive amounts of energy to get going. On previous models, and on the larger deep space explorers, this isn't too much of an issue, as the ships are large enough to carry energy scoops and large reactors, which provide the power to start the warp drive, but on these small ships, carrying something so large just wouldn't work, so the accelerator rings do the work of a reactor or scoop. The ship, well, technically the warp drive, passes through the rings, the rings are energized with power from a reactor, and the

energy surges into the drive, giving it enough power to form the Alcubierre field around the ship, and move faster than light. Dropping out of warp doesn't require nearly as much energy, though it does have a major risk. When the field starts to collapse, it first fails to the aft of the drive, slowly dropping as it movees forward, and finally, when it's no more than a few feet across, it rapidly contracts, dispelling all the energy still stored up in it. This doesn't sound too bad, and early scientists thought it wouldn't be an issue, one of the first warp tests ended up destroying Io, the moon of Jupiter. An entire moon just vaporized. It turns out the collapsing bubble has enough energy to destroy whole worlds. Since then everything has been done to keep the warp tech out of the hands of those who might use it as a weapon, and all nav-computers are programmed to dissengage the warp bubble away from any celestial body. So far we haven't lost any other worlds. Yet.

I pondered the warp bubble as I left my cabin, heading for the dining hall. Most of the corridors were white or gleaming metal, with colors painted on the floor and ceiling, these long colored stripes helped people find their way around the ship, following the red line, for example, led you to the bridge, whereas the green one would guide you to a dining hall, and blue to a restroom. Extremely handy for people who weren't used to the design of the Surveyor. The dining hall, despite its grand name, was nothing more than a 10x20m room, filled with tables and chairs, and a long bar on one side. All of the food on board the Surveyor was prepackaged and freeze dried, it was re-hydrated with water uplifted from Earth. Not the most pleasant of thoughts, but all the water used for toilets, showers, food and drink were all recycled and reused, using a system much like the old cruise ships on Earth used. People who spent a lot of time on board the ships generally tried to ignore that fact as they tucked into their food.

The trip home, as I feared, went by far too quickly. It wasn't long before you could see the growing dot of light that was Sol, we were just hours away from Earth, and then it'd be back to New York, reporting on local affairs, perhaps the odd trip to the Moon. Still, I figured it'd be good to step back on solid ground again, and the prospect of fresh, real food was very appealing, and really, who knows where News21 will send me next.

-James Ford, News21 Reporter, New York.

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