

## DIVERSIONS

WEEKEND EDITION

# My lesson in 'rocket' science had me all shook up

SARWAT NASIR



**I** will never forget the night when the ground beneath me literally shook, blinding rays of light lit up the dark skies and an ear-splitting sound nearly threw me off my feet. No, it was not an earthquake, nor a UFO; it was a powerful Russian rocket taking astronauts to the International Space Station.

I was standing 1.5km away from the Soyuz spacecraft with my camera ready to shoot as soon as liftoff happens. We, the media, were given plenty of space near the launch site in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, to capture this historic moment, taking place on July 20. Two astronauts and a cosmonaut were going to space on the same day Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon 50 years ago. It was an amazing coincidence.

I kept my index finger on my DSLR's record button and held my iPhone with my other hand. I was confident in my filming abilities even though I had no proper equipment to capture the blast-off in the manner it deserves.

Little did I know that the force of the rocket would be so strong and the sight so overwhelmingly beautiful, it would temporarily freeze my brain.

There was no countdown, though the sound and sight of the first stage — four boosters burning up to deliver a thrust that allows a kick-off speed of 8,300km an hour — was so loud and visually captivating, I immediately hit 'record' on both cameras.

What did my camera lens and I see? A 150-foot-tall and a 308kg rocket soaring towards the skies after the boosters fired up. The power of the ignition released so much fire and smoke I could feel the heat on my face and hands. After all, 1.5km isn't a great distance, especially when the liftoff impact is of that force.

Within just two minutes, the rocket was flying 41km high and 39km over land. The media, family members of the astronauts and tourists cheered as the boosters separated successfully, which is visible to the naked eye if you are near the launch site.

It was my first time seeing a rocket launch, so my camera and I were competing on who'd get the better visual. I wanted to see it with my own eyes, not through my lens.

And, after three minutes, the astronauts were out of gravity's reach.

I don't think words can describe the visual that was in front of me that day. It's an experience I suggest every human should see at least once in their life.

It was an honour and privilege for me to witness astronauts taking off in such a powerful rocket — currently the only one that can take humans to the ISS.

Though, there were a few thoughts that buzzed in my mind as I watched the remarkable scene: I now have more respect for professionals in the space industry; it was an awesome way to spend my birthday weekend; I can't believe they put humans in there; and where do I sign up to be a space tourist?

While we were waiting for liftoff, the ISS also flew over us, which made for another incredible coincidence.

Two days later, on July 22, India also successfully launched its Chandrayaan-2 to the moon.

It was spectacular week overall for space-related stories worldwide.

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Sarwat is currently accepting funds for her commercial space flight ticket



## Do you spend enough time with your grandparents?

PURVA GROVER



**A** couple of weeks ago, at the arrival area of Dubai International Airport, I experienced a string of beautiful emotions — straight out of a *Once Upon a Time* book. As I walked past the placards with names of people from different nationalities and that of hotels spread across different areas of Dubai, I saw a little girl, probably four or younger, blindfolded. Next to her were her parents; her mum held a phone in her hand, ready to record a video, whilst her dad kept an eye on the people walking out of the doors.

Seconds later, an older woman (on a wheelchair) was wheeled in by an airport staff member. Her smile was infectious. I stood there and smiled as I watched the family. This was the first time that the granddaughter and the grandmother were meeting and they'd decided to make it special for both of them. As the father removed the blindfold for his daughter, the mum captured the scene — the granny and grandchild looked at each other, followed by a warm smile, a warmer hug and many, many tears of joy. The moment was so adorable that almost everyone stood and just took in the purity and of it. There were excited shrieks on how the video should be instantly shared with the aunts and uncles.

As I reached home, I got thinking about grandparents and grandchildren of today. In our home, a much-loved topic of discussion at the dining table is how our parents have transformed into different people, now that they are grandparents. Of course, it means that my sister and I are one team, and my niece and parents are the other and much stronger team. There's no winning this one, especially since I can't stop talking about how the best days of my life happen to be the vacations I spent with my maternal grandparents.

Not that one needs to rely on studies on this topic, but time and again they do stress on the value of the bond. A latest study published in the journal *Child Development* found that a good relationship between the two generations is a simple and effective way to tackle ageism and teach the younger ones about kindness, respect, love, and family values and traditions. "The most important factor associated with ageist stereotypes was the poor quality of contact with grandparents," says lead researcher Allison Flaminio.

As we grow old, we chase dreams and start families of our own. In the process, we leave behind more than we're aware of. Today, nuclear families are the norm, with grandparents filling in for part-time caretakers when the need arises. There are also parents who often complain about the elders spoiling their kids with candies. But, that's a debate for another day.

Living in an expat community, I often notice how the visits by grandparents are timed accordingly to breaks at school, work trips, and more. As for me, I recall eating many mangoes in my grandparents' home, every now and then. That's not true for the grandkids of today. Perhaps, there's still a way out. A colleague and her grandad are buddies on WhatsApp. Their conversations are heart-warming and funny. A friend flew down her granny and the entire family to Dubai to celebrate her granny's 70th birthday. Interestingly, a new app G2G is being worked upon by the researchers at Simon Fraser University, which will allow the two generations to communicate via stickers and video messaging. "Families that were not frequently in touch and the kids didn't have a close relationship, have started to share their lives together," said Azadeh Forghani, one of the researchers.

We're in the middle of a school break and I have been spotting elderly men and women in our neighbourhood parks, capturing their grandkids feats on their phones — on play slides and skate parks. The pictures may be shaky, but they do the job of flaunting when they return home. Look around and you'd see how the elders have got a grip on technology just to make sure they don't miss out on what's happening in your lives. They've even embraced GIFs.

Parents and grandkids, it's time to re-boot the intergenerational bond. Why? For one, grandparents are great storytellers and willing to share loads of tales from your parents' childhood. Add bedtime stories to your night-time routine. And did I mention the cuddles? The latter, you just need to experience them once. Until then, why not be a little more patient on the family group chat and the video call.

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Purva is a storyteller in search of her favourite word