

Social distancing à la Neil Armstrong

A hero's welcome for the first men on the moon came only after they spent 88 hours in a mobile quarantine facility — to prevent the transmission of lunar germs on Earth



Over the moon President Nixon greets Apollo 11 astronauts at a mobile quarantine facility IMAGE COURTESY: NASA

At the Udvar-Hazy Center in Virginia, US — a companion facility to Washington DC's Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum — I was surrounded by some of the fastest, sleekest jets, rockets and shuttles known to mankind. The mobile quarantine facility (MQF), an aluminium trailer, seemed almost out of place. I gave it a quick glance, read the information board briefly, and moved on. But as the Covid-19 pandemic hits air travel and we shelter indoors, the object I most think about from that visit is the MQF. This was where the first men on the moon were initially quarantined, to beat the threat of lunar pathogens, colloquially called “moon germs”.

On July 20, 1969, Apollo 11, carrying commander Neil Armstrong, command module pilot Michael Collins and lunar module pilot Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin, made history as it landed humans on the moon. Four days later, the heroes came home as the shuttle splashed into the Pacific Ocean, southwest of Hawaii. Instead of a hero's welcome, a quarantine protocol set by the Interagency Committee on Back Contamination awaited them. Back then, little was known of lunar pathogens, much as is the case with Covid-19 today. But the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), wasn't taking chances. After donning biological isolation garments and being sprayed with disinfectant, the astronauts were transported to the MQF. This modified air-trailer is where they spent the first 88 hours after returning to Earth. The MQF was

transported via road and air to Houston's Lunar Receiving Lab (LRL), where the trio spent another 21 days in quarantine. At the MQF, the astronauts were joined by flight surgeon Dr William Carpentier, who attended to their medical needs, and John Hirasaki, mechanical engineer and technician of the MQF.

A small window in the MQF was their only opening to the world outside, similar to the way we've used our balconies during lockdown. There's an iconic image of President Richard Nixon greeting the three astronauts as they huddled together at the window. It was also through this screen — there was no Zoom back then — that the astronauts interacted with their wives and children.

As I peeked into the MQF through the same window, it seemed compact, like many Mumbai apartments. Within it was a lounge with six airplane seats around a foldable unit; a bedroom of sorts with bunk beds; a kitchen with an early example of a microwave unit; and a small bathroom. In NASA's oral history, Collins describes it as a “happy little home” where he “could've stayed longer”.

Dr Teasel Muir-Harmony, curator of the Apollo Collection at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, elaborates on the astronauts' time in the MQF: Once the medical exams were completed, the astronauts, Carpentier and Hirasaki had a cocktail hour. Carpentier became the impromptu bartender.

Don't miss

Among other exhibits at the Udvar-Hazy is the SR-71 Blackbird, the world's fastest jet-propelled aircraft, cruising at three times the speed of sound.

There is also the compact Cessna 180 used by Geraldine Mock, the first woman to pilot herself around the world

Virginia must-dos

- The Arlington Cemetery, the final resting place of over 400,000 military men and women, and their loved ones;
- Mount Vernon, the historic home of George and Martha Washington;
- Sunset Hills Vineyard in Loudoun County, a sprawling solar-powered winery that serves award-winning wines

Armstrong had Scotch; the others probably had martinis. For dinner, they ate grilled steaks and baked potatoes. Next morning, they enjoyed an elaborate breakfast of crepes, link sausages, pecan rolls and coffee. Food was delivered to the astronauts through the MQF's air-lock steriliser. They passed their time by signing pictures for NASA and White House VIPs. Armstrong and Collins played the card game gin rummy, while Aldrin played solitaire, or read.

What did the astronauts love about the MQF? The little things; Collins loved the “hot shower” because it was his first in eight days. Throw in a bit of quarantine art, too, because there's a file photo of Armstrong playing the ukulele in the MQF.

When the MQF landed in Houston, there was a welcome ceremony that the chief guests attended via the window. Soon after, all five residents entered the spacious LRL, where they were joined by many other staff members. The LRL was divided into three areas — the crew reception area, which would house the crew and other staff; the sample operations area, which came with a lab; and the administrative and support area. Once again a glass — albeit a much larger one — stood between them and the outside world. It was here that Armstrong celebrated his 39th birthday, with a cake that the staff had baked for him. Armstrong blew out the candles, cut

a slice and pretended to pass it over to his wife on the other side. Recently, Aldrin tweeted about that time, saying that they didn't have a case of “moon bugs. We just had a case of boredom!”.

At the end of 21 days, the astronauts were let out into the open. Post Apollo 14, NASA eliminated the need for such quarantine as the moon was found to be sterile. But at the time, in the words of Armstrong, the “unknowns vastly exceeded the knowns”, and NASA didn't risk it. Governments, take a cue?

Back then, little was known of lunar pathogens