

SpaceX launches Japanese robotic lander and NASA ice mapper to the moon

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket blasted off early Sunday from Cape Canaveral, boosting a commercially developed Japanese moon lander into space for a three-month voyage to touchdown in a 54-mile-wide crater. Also on board: A small NASA orbiter that will search for ice deposits in cold, permanently shadowed craters near the moon's poles.

Appropriately enough, the launching came on the 50th anniversary of the last Apollo moon landing in 1972 and just 10 hours before NASA's unpiloted Orion moonship was expected to splash down in the Pacific Ocean west of Baja California to close out a 25-day test flight.

Orion's Artemis 1 mission is intended to pave the way for piloted flights to the moon starting in 2024. Tokyo-based ispace, builder of the Hakuto-R lunar lander, hopes to help pave the way toward commercial operations on the moon, carrying small government and civilian payloads to the lunar surface.

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