

Little green men

by BRIAN LOCKHART

For some reason, there has been this fascination with Mars ? the red planet ? which peaked during the 1950s when it was speculated that the planet next to ours might contain life.

Old science fiction movies and TV shows speculated what our Martian cousins might look like. However, it's pretty much certain there are no little green men on Mars. These days, scientists are just looking for signs of bacteria or other microorganisms that may have been present at one time.

The Mars rover missions renewed interest in Mars. However, there wasn't much to see. A lot of rocks and soil, but that's about it.

Talk of sending a mission to Mars has been going on for quite a while, but so far, it is just an unrealistic dream.

Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX and builder of the Tesla electric car, has built a new rocket on a launch pad in Texas. It is called Starship. It was supposed to launch, but technical problems caused a delay.

It is the largest and most powerful rocket ever built. It stands taller, at almost 400 feet, and has a larger payload capability than the massive Saturn rocket that sent men to the moon.

You have to admire Elon Musk. He's quite the entrepreneur and visionary. His company is now doing things that government-funded agencies couldn't. That's probably because government bureaucracy tends to stifle the inventive process.

Elon is also very realistic when it comes to his rocket creation. He admitted there is a good chance of failure with his new rocket ? because it's new.

This rocket will have a massive amount of thrust, which somehow has to be properly contained and controlled. The unique characteristic of Starship is it is designed to be reusable.

The concept is that it will land vertically and can be fueled up to fly again. Yes, just like the cartoon version of space travel with Bugs Bunny and the Martian fellow.

Mr. Musk's long-term goal, of which yet there is no prediction of time, however he works pretty fast, is to eventually land a colony on Mars.

Some experts predict a human Mars landing by 2030.

It sure sounds like fun to fly to another planet and be the first to land, plant a flag and pop the cork on a bottle of champagne to celebrate.

The hard truth is, when and if they decide to launch a manned mission to Mars, the crew must realistically expect to never return.

Astronauts managed to land on the moon. That was a huge accomplishment and very dangerous. Mission commander Neil Armstrong later said he figured they had around a 50 per cent chance of accomplishing the mission. There were so many things that could go wrong. From crashing on the surface to failure of the lunar lander engine, any number of things could have doomed them to death in space.

The moon is three days of space travel away, and the landing was achieved by three men in a tiny capsule.

So far, there have been 40 unmanned missions to Mars. Only 18 were successful. The rest either crashed and burned or were lost in space.

Mars, at best, is a seven to nine-month trip. The logistics surrounding that mission would be huge.

The plan for Starship is to launch a colony of up to 100 people for the trip. Most likely they will start the first trip with a much smaller number of space travellers.

Even with a small group, trying to figure it all out would be quite an undertaking. How do you pack enough food on board for a round-trip excursion that will take 18 months if they only spend a week on the surface? Even well stocked submarines run out of food after only a couple of months at sea.

You would need all sorts of medical supplies and someone as a medical officer.

In the event of a breakdown, from air supply to water, or propulsion, or any needed instruments on board, you're pretty much done. You won't have spare parts, and you can't fix broken components in space with a wrench and hammer.

Then there would be the mental fatigue of being in a closed cylinder for that period of time. Sooner or later, one of your comrades will blow a gasket and try opening the door for a breath of fresh air.

Apparently, there are a lot of volunteers for the first suicide mission to Mars.

I'm going to enjoy my own version of a space capsule ? my Ford Escape ? which allows me to explore planet earth at my own convenience.