

IS THERE LIFE ON MARS?

I found this article in National Geographic, January 2004. I found it interesting because I am interested in knowing space.

People have asked that question for years.

The explorers are robotic. Their mission is to look for life on Mars. If water flows on the red planet, there's a chance life may exist there as well.

Before the explorers could start their voyage of discovery, they needed a name. NASA ran a contest to name the robots. Nearly 10,000 people entered the contest. Judges finally chose one that had been written by third grader Sofi Collis.

Shortly after being named, Spirit and Opportunity were on their way. Last June, the two explorers were launched from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

The launch was just the beginning. The flight to Mars takes seven months. And the journey is dangerous.

Over the years, humans have launched 30 missions to Mars. Only a third of them ever made it. The others developed problems or crashed into the planet.

If all goes well, Spirit and Opportunity will arrive at Mars this month. That's when the explorers get busy. They may see some of the most amazing features in the solar system.

A huge volcano—Olympus Mons—towers above the rest of the Martian surface.

Spirit and Opportunity will not stay in orbit for long. Their mission is to explore the alien world itself. They have to land on the surface.

To get there, the spacecraft will fall through the planet's. As the robots downward, parachutes will open. That will keep them from dropping too fast. Then the robots will hit the ground.

Large balloons will inflate during the fall. They will soften the robots' landing. Spirit and Opportunity will bounce safely across the rocky surface.

After the balloons deflate, the two robots will start exploring. But the pair aren't speed demons. They'll go only about two inches a second. That's less than three miles a day.

As they plod along, Spirit and Opportunity will look for something never found on Mars—water. The robots will try to find out if water ever existed on the red planet.

Why does it matter? Water is necessary for life. So if Mars has water, it may also have life.

That would be huge news. So far, Earth is the only known home to living things. Finding signs of Martian water, therefore, could turn the robots into two of history's most famous explorers.