

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## Mars the focus of three upcoming space missions

Space vehicles from three different countries will take advantage of an upcoming Mars launch window to head for the red planet in coming weeks.

Astronomer Dr Martin George, of the Launceston Planetarium at QVMAG, said each of the upcoming missions aimed to learn something new about Mars.

"It is only about once every 26 months that a launch 'window' lasting a few weeks allows craft to be launched to the red planet," Dr George said.

"This is because the positions of Earth and Mars in their orbits around the Sun need to be just right.

"Every couple of years, we have this great opportunity."

First to launch, from Japan, will be a United Arab Emirates mission called Hope, being sent to Mars early Wednesday morning (Tasmanian time). It will orbit Mars and study its weather and climate.

"Gathering more information about why the Martian climate has changed so much over Mars' history is so important to understanding processes on planets in general, even our own," Dr George said.

"I was in the UAE a few years ago, visiting planetariums there, and was impressed by their great interest in astronomy."

NASA will launch its Mars 2020 Rover, called Perseverance, between July 30 and mid-August. It will conduct several new experiments, and will carry the first powered flying machine sent to another planet: a little helicopter called Ingenuity.

"That Martian helicopter is really the 'wow!' part for me," Dr George said.

"I can't wait to see pictures of its flights."

Using the same launch window will be China, which will send its Tianwen-1 orbiter and lander to Mars.

All three missions will arrive at the Red Planet in early 2021.

Currently, Mars is visible low in the east by midnight, and it will rise earlier each night as the weeks and months go by.

Visitors to the Launceston Planetarium are shown where to find Mars and many other features of the night sky.

**Media opportunity:** Dr Martin George will be available for comment, today, Tuesday, July 14, at the Launceston Planetarium at QVMAG at 11am.