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NASA launches *Spirit* rover to Mars

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CAPE CANAVERAL, FLA. - Thunderclouds parted Tuesday, allowing NASA to launch *Spirit*, its six-wheeled robot to Mars. It will search for ancient signs of life.

The Mars Expedition Rover, and another one due for launch later in the month, are each about the size of a riding lawn mower. They will help scientists figure out whether water existed on the planet's surface long enough to support life.



View of earth from the booster rocket

The first launch at Cape Canaveral was twice delayed by poor weather. At 1:58 p.m., it began its 500-million-kilometre trip to the Red Planet aboard a Boeing *Delta II* rocket.

The \$800 million rovers are the most sophisticated robots ever sent to another planet. Both *Spirit* and the second rover, named *Opportunity*, are expected to land on opposite sides of the planet in January.

The robotic geologists are equipped with a panoramic camera to take a close-up look at rocks and drill into them for samples. The sites selected are the most likely to hold evidence of water, scientists say.

The camera's "eyes" were manufactured by Dalsa, a Montreal-based company. The image sensors will capture images for scientists to study. The technology is also used in mammograms, professional digital photography and mail sorting technology.

"I work all my life in science," said Robert Groulx of Dalsa. "So it's a big accomplishment for me and everyone here to arrive at that point."


Earlier missions showed signs of life in the past but scientists want to find out how long the water was there and how much there was. The water could show the planet once was able to support life.

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The missions are expected to last three months but could go longer.

✂ FROM JUNE 2, 2003 [Europe launches Mars spacecraft](#)




Europe launched an unmanned spacecraft last week, and a Japanese mission is also on its way.

The launches take advantage of celestial mechanics. Mars and Earth are closer together than they have been in years, which helps save fuel and travel time.

Only 12 out of 30 previous attempts have reached Mars, and only three out of nine attempts have succeeded in landing on the planet.

Written by CBC News Online [staff](#)

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