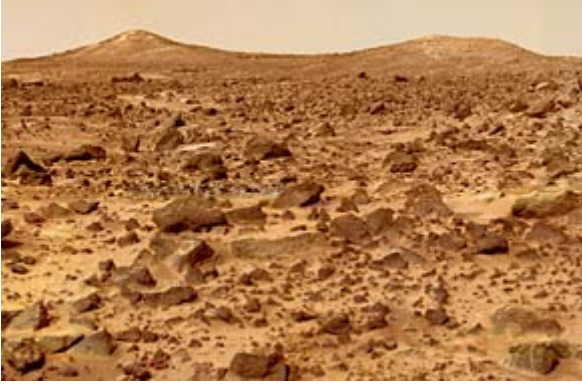


What a Difference a Decade Makes



The rusty color of Mars's surface, seen in this 1997 panorama from the Mars Pathfinder lander, may be due to oxidized iron from accumulated ages of infalling meteorites. More Martian landscapes, at full resolution, are available on the [Mars Pathfinder mission site](#).

NASA/JPL.

Do you remember where you were on July 4, 1997? I sure do. I was at Beckman Auditorium on the Caltech campus in Pasadena, California. Sitting with me was my late grandfather, my dad, and several hundred other space enthusiasts.

While we were on the ground, a space probe filled with untested technologies was hurtling through the Martian atmosphere. It released its parachutes, padded itself with air bags, bounced like a SuperBall across the ruddy landscape, and eventually radioed to Earth that all was well. It marked the first time since the 1970s that the US had successfully landed on Mars, and it rekindled the world's passion for planetary science.

Since the Jet Propulsion Laboratory ("mission control") was overflowing with press and scientists, JPL staffers and their families who wanted to see the event had to watch via a live feed over at Caltech. As an undergraduate, I called up my own family and camped out for seats like I was waiting for tickets to a rock concert. And it might as well have been a concert. When the "all clear" from the control room boomed over Beckman's loudspeakers, the crowd around me got every bit as loud as any arena I've ever visited.

What I didn't realize at that moment was that the golden age of Mars exploration had just begun. Since then, roving on Mars has become an everyday occurrence. Mars Pathfinder paved the way for Spirit and Opportunity, the incredibly long-lived [Mars Exploration Rovers](#). In August, NASA plans to launch the [Phoenix](#) lander. And [Mars Science Laboratory](#) is set to lift off in 2009. And that's not even counting the suite of successful orbiters, starting with [Mars Global Surveyor](#), that have kept the Red Planet under constant scrutiny since September 1997.

NASA made a [cute video](#) marking the Pathfinder anniversary. It's worth watching, but it doesn't come close to conveying the unbelievable sense of joy, excitement, and pride that I felt 10 years ago.