

Huygens on Titan, First Images 2:45 p.m. EST

January 14 2005

European Space Agency mission managers for the Huygens probe confirm that data of the probe's descent to Saturn's moon Titan are being received. They expect to see first images around 2:45 p.m. Eastern Time. The data was transmitted from the probe to NASA's Cassini spacecraft and then back to Earth. Scientists are interested in Titan because its chemistry is thought to be very similar to that of early Earth, before life formed.

The Cassini-Huygens mission to Saturn is the most ambitious effort in planetary space exploration ever mounted. A joint endeavour of the European Space Agency (ESA), NASA and the Italian space agency, Agenzia Spaziale Italiana (ASI), Cassini-Huygens is sending a sophisticated robotic spacecraft to orbit the ringed planet and study the Saturnian system in detail over a four-year period. On board Cassini is a scientific probe called Huygens that will be released from the main spacecraft to parachute through the atmosphere to the surface of Saturn's largest and most interesting moon, Titan.

The 12 scientific instruments on the Cassini orbiter are conducting in-depth studies of the planet, its moons, rings and magnetic environment. The six instruments on the Huygens probe, which was dispatched from Cassini during its first orbit of Saturn on 25 December 2004, will provide our first direct sampling of Titan's atmospheric chemistry and the first photographs of its hidden surface. Huygens will make a detailed on-the-spot study of Titan's atmosphere. It will also characterise the surface along the descent ground track and near the landing site.

Studying the complex organic chemistry at work on Titan may provide clues on how life began on Earth.

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