

Coming soon: 3D views of the sun

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The first spacecraft designed to record "stereo" views of the sun and solar wind are at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland for pre-launch testing.

The twin probes were shipped Wednesday from Johns Hopkins University's Applied Physics Laboratory in Laurel, Md.

The nearly identical twin STEREO -- Solar TERrestrial RELations Observatory -- probes were recently tested at the APL for structural integrity.

The tests simulated the ride into space the observatories will encounter during their launch aboard a Delta II rocket from Cape Canaveral next spring.

After undergoing additional pre-launch checks -- including thermal vacuum testing to duplicate the extreme temperature and airless conditions of space -- the STEREO observatories will be moved to Florida in March for final launch preparations.

During their two-year mission, the observatories will explore the origin, evolution and interplanetary consequences of coronal mass ejections.

To obtain "stereo" views of the sun, the observatories must be placed in different orbits where they're offset from each other and the Earth.

One observatory will be placed ahead of the Earth's orbit and the other

behind. That placement will allow the STEREO observatories to obtain 3-D images and particle measurements of the sun.

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