

Shuttle Discovery on track for afternoon landing

March 28 2009, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this image provided by NASA the International Space Station is backdropped by the blackness of space and the thin line of Earth's atmosphere as seen from Space Shuttle Discovery as the two spacecraft begin their relative separation Wednesday March 25, 2009. Discovery and its crew of seven were due back Saturday afternoon, ending a nearly two-week mission that left the international space station fully powered with a new set of solar wings. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- Shuttle Discovery and its crew of seven aimed for a Saturday afternoon touchdown at NASA's spaceport to wrap up a successful space station construction mission.

At midmorning, Mission Control said favorable weather was expected. But experts were keeping close watch on the clouds and wind.

The seven astronauts are winding up a 13-day mission highlighted by the

successful installation and unfurling of the space station's last pair of [solar wings](#). The \$300 million addition brought the orbiting outpost up to full power, a vital part of NASA's plan to double the space station population and boost the amount of science work in a few months.

Discovery is bringing back former space station resident Sandra Magnus. Saturday marked her 134th day in orbit; she was launched back in mid-November.

The shuttle also is ferrying five months' worth of science samples from the space station, mostly blood, urine and saliva collected by its crew members. As many vials as possible were stuffed into the shuttle freezer, with the rest put in ice packs.

Also coming back for [NASA](#) scientists: four to five liters of recycled water that had been the astronauts' own urine and sweat. The water was produced after Discovery delivered a new urine processor that fixed the recycling machine.

NASA hopes to have the water samples tested within a month. If the toxicology results are good, the three space station residents will be given the all-clear to start drinking the recycled water up there.

The space station, meanwhile, got more guests Saturday with the arrival of a Russian Soyuz capsule, just three days after Discovery's departure.

Two of the newcomers - an American and a Russian - will swap places with commander Mike Fincke and cosmonaut Yuri Lonchakov, who have been in orbit six months.

Billionaire space tourist Charles Simonyi, a former Microsoft executive, also flew up on the Soyuz for a 1 1/2-week visit.

On the Net:

NASA: <http://spaceflight.nasa.gov>

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