

Space station's new solar wings open easily (Update 2)

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In this image from NASA TV, the international space station begins the process of opening new solar wings while orbiting Earth, Friday, March 20, 2009. (AP Photo/NASA TV)

(AP) -- Astronauts successfully unfurled the newly installed solar wings at the international space station Friday, a nerve-racking procedure that went exceedingly well and brought the orbiting outpost to full power.

To NASA's relief, both wings went out smoothly, one at a time. Nothing hung up, and none of the panels stuck together like they had on previous panels.

The wings stretched more than 240 feet, a glistening golden hue in the

sunlight and a dazzling sight for the [astronauts](#) and everyone else involved.

"It's just really amazing," said Mike Fincke, the space station's skipper. He said there was "a shout of triumph" aboard the linked station-shuttle complex once the two wings were fully extended.

The work was a highlight of shuttle Discovery's mission. Completed 220 miles above Earth, the new panels are the final pair of electricity-generating wings and should boost the amount of science research at the orbiting outpost.

"Great work, guys," Mission Control told the astronauts. "We've got a whole bunch of happy people down here,"

The long, deliberate procedure began the morning after this last set of [solar wings](#) was hooked up to the orbiting complex.

Right on cue, astronaut John Phillips pushed the button that commanded the first wing to start unfurling. It slowly stretched out like a folded-up map. When the wing was halfway open, Phillips stopped the motion for nearly an hour so the panels could soak up sunlight and be less likely to stick.

The second wing, which had been boxed up for years, opened just as easily. A slight crinkle was spotted near the bottom, but flattened when the wing was stretched out.

Most if not all the astronauts watched the wings unfold, peering out windows and through camera lenses, ready to hit the "abort" button in case of trouble.

Flight controllers as well as managers anxiously monitored everything,

given the past problems. The last time a solar wing was unfurled in 2007, it caught on a guide wire and ripped. Emergency spacewalking repairs were needed to fix it.

"We learned from that and made it very smoothly," Fincke said.

After 10 years of assembly, the space station now has eight full wings. Altogether, the wings will be capable of generating enough electrical power for about 42 large houses, according to [NASA](#).

On Thursday, a pair of spacewalking astronauts hooked up the \$300 million framework that holds the wings. This last major American-made addition increased the mass of the space station to 670,000 pounds; it is now 81 percent complete. Construction is scheduled to wrap up next year with the retirement of NASA's shuttles.

Discovery is due to leave the space station Wednesday. Its landing, though, may be moved up a day to preserve science samples being returned from the station. Right now, touchdown is scheduled for March 28.

On the Net:

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

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