

US space tourist blasts off to space station

March 26 2009, By DAVID NOWAK , Associated Press Writer



Russian cosmonaut and crew commander Gennady Padalka, left, and American astronaut Michael Barratt, right, crew members of the 19th mission to the International Space Station, ISS, are seen prior the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Thursday, March 26, 2009. The Russian-American team set to blast off to the international space station said that doubling the station's permanent crew will make life more cramped but will further scientific research. Russian commander Gennady Padalka and American flight engineer Michael Barratt are to be part of the new six-person crew aboard the station, which previously has had three people aboard long-term. (AP Photo/Mikhail Metzel)

(AP) -- A Russian capsule carrying U.S. billionaire space tourist Charles Simonyi sailed into orbit Thursday after blasting off in a roar of fire for the international space station.

The [Soyuz](#) rocket, with a Russian-American crew, lifted off on schedule from the Baikonur cosmodrome facility into overcast skies over northern

Kazakhstan's barren steppe.

Simonyi, a 60-year-old software designer who paid \$35 million for his second trip on the Soyuz, joined Russian cosmonaut Gennady Padalka and American astronaut Michael Barratt in the cramped capsule, where they will sit for nearly two days before hooking up Saturday with the station, orbiting some 220 miles (350 kilometers) above the Earth.

Minutes after blast-off, TV cameras from inside the Soyuz showed Padalka and Barratt waving for the camera and giving the thumbs-up OK sign.

At viewing stands about a mile (kilometer) away, scores of officials, reporters and relatives watched the launch, including Simonyi's 28-year-old Swedish socialite wife Lisa Persdotter, who wept and clutched at the coat of her mother.

"I'm very, very happy. It was very, very smooth," she said afterward. "But I'm very emotional," she added.

Minutes before liftoff, Persdotter said she had recently quit her work to plan their lives together, which she said would not include any form of space travel after Simonyi returns. "I am so nervous," she said.

Barratt's wife, Michelle, watched smiling as the rocket rose into the clouds: "We feel great, it was a great launch." she said afterward.

Also watching was Paul Allen, a co-founder of software giant Microsoft Corp., where Simonyi worked for many years.

"It's fantastic to see a launch, but when it's one of your friends, it's just something so special.," he said.

Asked if he would be interested in going to space sometime, Allen said he would consider it; not on the Russian capsules or U.S. shuttles, but on one of his own crafts. In 2004, Allen used his Microsoft fortunes to bankroll [SpaceShipOne](#), which in 2004 became the first private, manned craft to reach space.

Richard Garriot, an American former [space tourist](#), praised the Russian space program for its reliability.

"It's so amazing about how they do this over here. On time, every time, perfectly," he said.

While Barratt and Padalka will join the current station's permanent crew, Simonyi will return to Earth 13 days later - a trip that will make him the first two-time space tourist and, for the foreseeable future, the last.

The space station's permanent crew is expanding from three to six, leading Russian officials to rule out space tourism from Baikonur for now.

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