

Space shuttle landing held up by stormy weather

May 22 2009, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this image provided by NASA, Space Shuttle Atlantis is backdropped by the blackness of space and the thin line of Earth's atmosphere Wednesday, May 20, 2009. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- Thunderstorms raking NASA's spaceport kept space shuttle Atlantis in orbit an extra day Friday, giving the crew unwanted downtime as they aimed for a landing the next day. After passing up two opportunities to land Friday at Kennedy Space Center, Mission Control thanked the seven astronauts for their patience.

"We know you looked at it hard," replied commander Scott Altman. A little later, he informed flight controllers, "We're enjoying the view."

The [astronauts](#) - fresh off successful repairs of the Hubble [Space Telescope's](#) sophisticated instruments - intended to spend part of their

day off watching DVDs. But when they tried to play the movies, they found out that their laptops didn't have the proper software.

Engineers on the ground tried to troubleshoot the problem, but the astronauts gave up after more than an hour of trying.

"We'll be home tomorrow," an optimistic astronaut John Grunsfeld radioed to Earth. "We'll go to the movie theater and that will be our consolation."

The astronauts had been warned for days that the weather outlook was grim, and the forecasts proved true

NASA pressed ahead, instead, with a possible return to the landing site on Saturday morning. But the low-pressure system drenching Florida stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Caribbean, and forecasters anticipated only slightly improved conditions over the weekend.

As a precaution, NASA activated its backup touchdown site at Edwards Air Force Base in California, where good [weather](#) was expected. But landing there would mean more time and money - an estimated \$1.8 million - to get Atlantis back to its Florida home base.

There are three Saturday landing opportunities at both Kennedy Space Center and Edwards Air Force Base.

The shuttle has enough supplies to stay in orbit until Monday.

During the 12-day flight, the astronauts carried out five back-to-back spacewalks to fix and upgrade Hubble for the final time. The 19-year-old observatory is now considered better than ever and should keep sending back breathtaking views of the cosmos for another five to 10 years. Scientists hope to get the first results by September.

Atlantis is also bringing back a wide-field camera that was replaced with a newer model, so it can be put on display at the Smithsonian Institution.

The six men and one woman were the last humans to set eyes on Hubble up close. NASA plans no more satellite-servicing missions of this type, with the space telescope or anything else. That's because the shuttle is being retired next year. The replacement craft will essentially be a capsule to ferry astronauts back and forth to the international space station and, ultimately, the moon.

NASA considered this fifth and final Hubble repair mission so dangerous that, in 2004, a year after the Columbia tragedy, it was canceled. The space agency reinstated it two years later after developing repair methods for astronauts in orbit and preparing a backup rescue plan that would have launched a second shuttle to bring astronauts back to earth.

The backup plan that kept the shuttle Endeavour on standby was called off Thursday after one last inspection found Atlantis' thermal shielding to be free of any serious damage from space junk.

On the Net:

NASA: <http://www.nasa.gov/mission-pages/hubble/main/index.html>

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