

Canadian circus billionaire heads to space station

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Canadian billionaire Quebec-born philanthropist Guy Laliberte, a crew member of the 21st mission to the International Space Station, ISS, jokes as he wears a clown nose prior to the launch of a Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2009. Laliberte is due to stay at the International Space Station for nine days, before returning to earth on a Soyuz capsule on Oct. 11. (AP Photo/Mikhail Metzel)[

(AP) -- A Canadian circus tycoon, an American astronaut and a Russian cosmonaut blasted off in a spacecraft from the Kazakh steppe Wednesday on a journey to the International Space Station.

Minutes after lifting off from the Baikonur launch facility, the [Soyuz capsule](#) shed its rocket stages and entered orbit. On board were Cirque du Soleil founder and [space tourist](#) Guy Laliberte along with crew members Jeffrey Williams and Maxim Surayev.

Friends and family on the ground cheered and hugged one another when an announcement that the ship was in orbit came over the loudspeaker. They chanted "Guy! Guy!" and broke out singing Elton John's "Rocket Man."

Laliberte, dubbed the first clown in space, had donned a bulbous red nose and blew kisses to supporters before the launch. He has paid \$35 million for the trip he plans to use to publicize the world's growing shortage of clean water.

"I'm very happy for him. It's amazing," said Laliberte's partner, former model Claudia Barilla, tears streaming down her face as she cradled her young son in her arms. "Now we know he's up there."

She wore a yellow clown nose as she watched the launch. Laliberte brought several clown noses for crew mates aboard the station and has impishly warned he would tickle them while they slept.

Footage of the capsule showed crew members Williams and Surayev strapped in, operating the controls and occasionally waving for the camera.

A mission control official communicating with the [astronauts](#) said they were in excellent spirits, and a NASA TV announcer said they were "safely in orbit."

"We were worried, because this has been a tough road - 12 years of hard training," first-time space traveler Surayev's wife, Anya, said at

Baikonur. "But we are pleased, happy and proud that the liftoff went off without a hitch."

The Soyuz TMA-16 craft is scheduled to arrive Friday at the [International Space Station](#), orbiting 220 miles (355 kilometers) above Earth.

Laliberte - who rose from being a street performer to founding the circus arts and theater company Cirque Du Soleil 25 years ago - is to return to Earth after 12 days. The 50-year-old is worth an estimated \$2.5 billion and holds a 95 percent stake in the circus company.

Laliberte's enthusiasm seemed to infect others ahead of the launch preparations. As the crew members climbed up the ladder into the capsule, Surayev began singing the pop song "Mammy Blue," and Laliberte and Williams joined him.

Among the spectators was Quebec singer Garou, a friend of Laliberte.

"I feel a lot more mesmerized than I ever thought I would be," Garou said after the launch. "Having your friend rising up that fast and that impressively is beyond what I expected."

Surayev, 37, and Williams, 51, plan to stay in orbit for 169 days. Williams is on his third space mission and recently became a grandfather.

"I'm glad he's up there - that's what he wanted to do," said the astronaut's wife, Anna-Marie. "Now all the training is behind us and he will just go up and do the mission."

Surayev hung a plush toy lion in front of him at the control panel to signal the beginning of weightlessness. He said his preteen daughters had

kept the toy under their pillows to "make sure that the lion smells of home for the next six months."

The Soyuz team is scheduled to help continue construction of the space station, where in-orbit work began in 1998. Recent missions have expanded the station's capacity to allow six inhabitants, though Surayev and Williams will be alone for about three weeks at year's end after the station's current occupants leave.

Six shuttle flights remain to wrap up construction on the station - now Earth's largest artificial satellite, weighing more than 710,000 pounds (322,000 kilograms).

The station has cost more than \$100 billion, paid by the United States, Russia, Canada, Japan and the 18-nation European Space Agency.

Laliberte is the seventh paying space tourist to travel to the station and may be one of its last private visitors for several years as NASA retires its shuttle program and turns to the Russian space agency to ferry U.S. astronauts to the lab.

Space Adventures, which organized the private visits, will nevertheless aim to make sure more tourists get to visit the space station in the coming years, company CEO Eric Anderson said, suggesting the number of Russian Soyuz missions could be increased.

"I keep hearing that space tourism is ending and it never seems to be true," Anderson told The Associated Press.

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