

# Circus tycoon clowns around aboard space station

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Canadian billionaire Quebec-born philanthropist Guy Laliberte, center, Russian cosmonaut Maxim Surayev, bottom, and U.S. astronaut Jeffrey Williams, top, crew members of the 21st mission to the International Space Station, ISS, gesture, prior to the launch of 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. Surayev and Williams will remain on the ISS until March 2010. (AP Photo/NASA, Bill Ingalls)

(AP) -- A Canadian circus billionaire boarded the International Space Station on Friday after a smooth ride up from Earth, and promptly played the entertainer by donning a red clown nose for a camera.

Cirque du Soleil founder Guy Laliberte became the seventh paying space tourist to travel to the station, where he plans to mix clownish fun with a serious message about the growing shortage of clean water on the planet 220 miles (355 kilometers) below.

Laliberte floated onto the orbiting outpost along with American astronaut Jeffrey Williams and Russian cosmonaut Maxim Surayev two days after the three had launched in Soyuz craft from the Kazakh steppe.

Laliberte returns to Earth on Oct. 11, while Williams and Surayev will live on the station for nearly six months.

"I'm adapting pretty good. I love that thing - but I ain't staying six months," Laliberte said in a video linkup to Russian Mission Control outside Moscow, where his five children and partner Claudia Barilla watched the Soyuz TMA-16 docking on a big screen.

He chatted with his children in French - "Allo, Papou," a son said; "Je t'aime, Papou," said a daughter. He put on a red clown nose and wagged an index finger at his audience, stealing the show as he crowded in with the space station's eight other occupants in zero gravity.

Laliberte also asked one of his children why she wasn't wearing a clown nose, and she said she had forgotten it.

"We were happy he didn't get space sick," Barilla told The Associated Press while cuddling their 2-year-old daughter.

An experienced acrobat, fire-eater and stilt-walker, Laliberte also had put on a clown nose before Wednesday's launch, and brought several to the station for crew mates to try on. He warned he would tickle them while they sleep.

But he has a serious mission as well. He planned to read a poem dedicated to water conservation in a satellite linkup to be shown in 14 cities next Friday. Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, pop singer Peter Gabriel and Irish rock group U2 also will participate.

Quebec-born Laliberte, 50, is worth an estimated \$2.5 billion.

On his return to Earth, he will accompany two of the station's current crew members aboard one of three Soyuz crafts now docked at the station.

The former street performer is worth an estimated \$2.5 billion and holds a 95 percent stake in Cirque du Soleil, which he founded 25 years ago.

But Laliberte may be among the last space tourists for several years, with NASA planning to retire its shuttle fleet next year and rely on Russia to ferry U.S. astronauts to the station - meaning fewer extra seats on the delivery craft.

Russian space agency chief Anatoly Perminov said Friday that Russia will be unable to send tourists to the station if the United States does not continue its shuttle flights.

Third-time space traveler Williams, 51, and first-timer Surayev, 37, will be in orbit for 169 days.

"We are really proud of him," said Surayev's wife, Anna, who watched the docking along with their two daughters. "Glad his dream came true, because it took him 12 years to achieve it."

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