

Astronauts inspect space shuttle in case of damage

November 17 2009, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this photo provided by NASA, guests at NASA's Kennedy Space Center view the launch of space shuttle Atlantis in Cape Canaveral, Fla., on Monday, Nov. 16, 2009. Space shuttle Atlantis and its six-member crew began the 11-day STS-129 mission to the International Space Station. The shuttle will transport spare hardware to the outpost and return a station crew member who spent more than two months in space. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- Space shuttle Atlantis' astronauts scoured their ship Tuesday for any signs of launch damage while pursuing the International Space Station.

Atlantis and its crew of six will hook up with the space station Wednesday.

After waking to their first full day in orbit, the astronauts pulled out a

100-foot, laser-tipped inspection boom to check the shuttle's thermal shielding, routine work before arriving at the space station. The right wing was scanned first.

It was a long, laborious job that was expected to last well into the afternoon.

NASA said a quick look at the images from Monday's launch shows nothing to be worried about. The inspection will provide additional data, as will pictures taken right before Wednesday's docking. The space station residents will take a few hundred close digital photos as Atlantis pulls up and performs a somersault.

Engineers will pore over all the information to ascertain whether Atlantis is intact and able to make a safe descent, when it comes time to return home at the end of next week.

The space agency has been extra cautious since the Columbia disaster nearly seven years ago. The left wing was punctured by a big chunk of foam insulation that came off the fuel tank at liftoff, causing the shuttle to break apart during re-entry. All seven astronauts were killed.

Officials believe three small foam pieces peeled away from Atlantis' tank, but it happened too many minutes after liftoff to pose any danger.

Atlantis is delivering big spare parts to the space station - nearly 15 tons' worth.

It's an 11-day flight, which will keep the crew in orbit over Thanksgiving.

"Congratulations on a beautiful, flawless launch, Atlantis!" Mission Control told the crew in a wake-up message. "Now the fun begins."

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