

## Shuttle docks at space station, unloads parts (Update 2)

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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 arrived at the International Space Station on Wednesday for a weeklong stay, and the astronauts quickly unloaded a huge platform full of spare parts needed to keep the outpost running for another decade.

The platform - 16 feet by 14 feet - contained pumps, storage tanks and other equipment weighing hundreds of pounds each. Robot arms did the heavy lifting, just hours after the two craft came together 220 miles

above the Pacific, between Australia and Tasmania.

Astronaut Nicole Stott, a space station resident for the past 2 1/2 months, was thrilled to see her ride home. She spotted Atlantis from three miles out.

"I have my ticket all ready and stamped, waiting for you guys when you get here," Stott radioed to shuttle commander Charles Hobaugh.

"Who is this?" Hobaugh teased.

"It's your favorite passenger," she replied. "You look beautiful out there."

Just before docking, Hobaugh guided Atlantis through a pirouette for the space station cameras, for a final check to make sure there's no damage to the thermal tiles on its belly.

So far, all indications are the shuttle made it through Monday's liftoff just fine, NASA officials said. The astronauts surveyed their ship Tuesday for any signs of launch damage, and a quick look at the laser images shows everything in good shape. Experts will continue to analyze the data, as well as the approximately 300 digital photos that were taken Wednesday.

The only shuttle problem of note - more a nuisance than anything - involved the laptops. The astronauts had to contend with a poky connection rather than the usual DSL-type high speed, which slowed the transmission of pictures, charts and e-mails between Atlantis and Mission Control. Critical operations were not affected, said flight director Mike Sarafin.

Atlantis will remain at the orbiting outpost until the day before

Thanksgiving, enough time for the two crews - 12 astronauts total - to unload nearly 15 tons of spare parts. Half of that gear was moved from the shuttle to the station shortly after the docking.

Stott, the only woman, greeted Hobaugh with a kiss on the cheek once the hatches swung open. She promptly became a member of the shuttle crew. The space station staff fell to five.

Besides pumps and tanks, Atlantis is dropping off hefty gyroscopes, battery chargers and extra snares for the robot arm, as well as some small, fragile science experiments. Perhaps the most delicate are four butterfly larvae, a student experiment. The plan is for the larvae to develop into Painted Lady butterflies over the next week or two and return on the next shuttle flight in February.

The first of three spacewalks - to install a spare antenna and some cables - will take place Thursday.

NASA is stockpiling the space station with as much equipment as possible, taking advantage of the spacious shuttle payload bay while it can. Once the shuttles are retired next fall, the orbiting complex will lose its biggest supplier. Officials hope to keep the station operating until 2015, possibly 2020 if President Barack Obama gives the go ahead.

Five shuttle missions remain after this one. NASA is still awaiting word from the White House on what happens after that.

In a jab at the uncertain future, Mission Control sent up a cartoon to Atlantis' crew that showed an astronaut standing, helmet in hand, alongside a landed shuttle. A bureaucrat is telling the newly returned spaceman, "Sorry. Just because you have 20 million miles on your odometer and a few loose tiles on your '74 vehicle, it doesn't make you eligible for the cash for clunkers program."

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