

# Astronauts blast off for Christmas space mission

December 20 2009, By PETER LEONARD , Associated Press Writer

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This image provided by NASA shows the Soyuz TMA-17 rocket launching from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan on Monday, Dec. 21, 2009. (AP Photo/Bill Ingalls, NASA)

(AP) -- A Russian rocket blasted off from a cosmodrome in Kazakhstan lighting up the frigid Central Asian steppe Monday, shuttling an American, a Russian and a Japanese to the International Space Station.

Standing in the early morning cold, the astronauts' family and friends watched as the Soyuz craft soared atop a tower of bright orange flames.

The Soyuz TMA-17's three astronauts will take the orbiting laboratory's permanent crew to five following the early-hours launch, the first-ever

blastoff of a [Soyuz rocket](#) on a winter night.

Timothy J. Creamer, Soichi Noguchi and Oleg Kotov are to join current inhabitants, American Jeff Williams and Russian Maxim Surayev, who have been alone on the space station for three weeks.

This was a "spectacular launch, a great Christmas present," NASA spokesman Rob Navias said after space officials confirmed the rocket had entered into orbit. "A great way to finish the year."

A NASA television Webcast showed the crew giving a thumbs up sign as the vessel hurtled skyward.

One minute into the launch, the rocket reached a speed of around 500 meters (1,640 feet) per second.

The Soyuz will travel for about two days before docking with the space station 220 miles (350 kilometers) above Earth.

Reporting to Russian space officials prior to the launch, the astronauts seemed calm and relaxed.

Speaking fluent Russian, Creamer thanked technical staff for their role in preparing for the expedition.

One of the main aims of the expedition will be to deliver a full-fledged module to the space station, complete with a seven-window cupola for prime Earth gazing, Navias said.

Striking a festive mood, the space station this week beamed a video Christmas greeting to Earth.

On its Web site, the U.S. space agency NASA has created a series of

virtual postcards for members of the public to send to the space station with their holiday greetings.

Creamer, who is making his maiden voyage to space, has promised to keep people back on earth up-to-date via Twitter.

In a message posted from his mobile device just hours before the launch he wrote, "Will tweet soonest. Happy & Safe holidays to all!"

Noguchi is heading back to space for his second time and has become the first professional Japanese astronaut to fly aboard the Soyuz.

The first space station crew arrived in 2000, two years after the first part was launched. Until this year, no more than three people lived up there at a time, although there were as many as six people aboard for short periods when a space tourist would go up with one crew, spend a week or so aboard and come back with another crew.

With the U.S. shuttle fleet set to be grounded soon, [NASA](#) and other international partners will have to rely on Russian Soyuz spacecraft to ferry their astronauts to the space station and back.

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