

Endeavour astronauts say goodbye to space station

February 19 2010, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



This image provided by NASA shows an orbital sunrise is featured in this image photographed by Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency astronaut Soichi Noguchi, Expedition 22 flight engineer, from a window in the newly-installed Cupola of the International Space Station while space shuttle Endeavour remains docked with the station Thursday Feb. 18, 2010. A Russian Progress spacecraft, docked to the Pirs Docking Compartment, is visible at right. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- The crews of the linked space shuttle and space station embraced and said farewell Friday as they prepared for Endeavour to begin its two-day trip home after "a mission of Olympic proportions."

There were hugs and handshakes all around as the six Endeavour astronauts floated one by one out of the [International Space Station](#), where they installed a stunning seven-window observation deck that gives astronauts unparalleled views of Earth. The hatches between the

craft were then sealed in preparation for Friday night's undocking.

"We are really going to enjoy the view. I wish you guys could stay a little longer to partake in that view," the space station's skipper, Jeffrey Williams, told his shuttle friends.

"Yeah, it's tough to turn away from that window," shuttle commander George Zamka said of the atrium's domed centerpiece, the largest window ever launched into space.

Each of the astronauts spent a few moments alone in the dome late Thursday, taking in what they described as amazing and stunning views of Earth.

"Arguably, mankind has been after this view for centuries, this perspective, this view of the world, and we finally have it," Zamka said.

"It culminates just about the assembly complete of the space station," Williams added.

The 11 space fliers teamed up over the past week to install the dome and a new room, called Tranquility, marking the last of the major space station building blocks. They finished some last-minute packing, then gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony on the eve of Endeavour's undocking.

Zamka presented a plaque to hang in the dome that contained four chips of [moon rock](#) and a stone retrieved from the top of Mt. Everest. A former astronaut carried the moon fragments to the top of Everest last spring.

The lunar chips were collected from the Sea of Tranquility during man's first moon landing in 1969. The chamber was named after that

momentous achievement.

Zamka said the rocks will serve "as a reminder of man's reach and man's grit as they go out and explore."

Earlier Thursday, the two shuttle astronauts who swung open the window shutters on the [observation deck](#) for the first time Wednesday were rendered almost speechless when they gazed at the Earth 220 miles below.

"It's going to be so hard to put into words the view that we see out those beautiful seven windows," astronaut Kay Hire said in a news conference. "The best way I can think of is comparing a black and white analogue picture to a super high-def color picture. It's just phenomenal what we can see out there."

Endeavour delivered the Italian-built Tranquility and lookout last week, a more than \$400 million addition that brought the space station to 98 percent of completion. Four shuttle visits remain to haul up supplies, spare parts and science experiments.

Mission Control congratulated the astronauts for "a docked mission of Olympic proportions." The shuttle is due back on Earth late Sunday night.

"You are officially the only folks who are able to get more hang time than Shaun White," Mission Control noted in a message.

The five space station [astronauts](#) have been keeping on top of the Olympics. The orbiting outpost finally got Internet access last month.

"The distance has become closer," said Japanese astronaut Soichi Noguchi. "I can access the Olympic results just like you on Earth."

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