

Space shuttle Endeavour pulls in at space station

February 10 2010, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



Space shuttle Endeavour lifts-off from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla., Monday, Feb. 8, 2010. Endeavour is carrying six astronauts who will deliver a room and observation deck to the International Space Station. A piece of foam insulation is seen falling to the right of the orbiter. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

(AP) -- Shuttle Endeavour arrived to a warm welcome at the International Space Station early Wednesday, delivering a new room and observation deck that will come close to completing construction 200 miles above Earth.

The midnight rendezvous occurred as the two spacecraft sailed over the Atlantic, just west of Portugal. It took longer than normal to lock the shuttle and station together because of the relative motion between the two. The space station's five residents filled the time, before their guests came aboard, by trying out camera angles and interviewing one another.

"What are you expecting from the shuttle?" Japanese astronaut Soichi Noguchi asked Russian cosmonaut Maxim Suraev. "My cucumbers," Suraev replied, getting a big laugh.

The two crews shook hands and embraced when the hatches finally opened, greeting each other with "good to see you" and "how goes it" while floating inside the space station.

Space station commander Jeffrey Williams said he was happy to see his friends - "really happy because we haven't seen many people other than the crew for a long time."

The shuttle's six astronauts were impressed with what they saw.

"We couldn't believe how spectacular and shiny the space station was," said Endeavour's commander, George Zamka.

Back at Mission Control, [NASA](#) said that standard checks hadn't revealed any launch damage so far. All the pictures and information collected during the first two days of the flight indicate Endeavour suffered no serious damage during Monday's liftoff. But the analysis is continuing, and a few hundred photos taken from the space station during Endeavour's final approach will yield additional data, said LeRoy Cain, chairman of the mission management team.

Endeavour's crew will spend more than a week at the space station, installing the compartments - worth about \$400 million - and helping

with space station maintenance.

This represents the last major construction work at the orbiting outpost. Once the room, named Tranquility, and the [observation deck](#) are in place, the station will be 98 percent complete.

Before docking, Zamka guided Endeavour through a 360-degree back flip so two of the space station crew could photograph the shuttle's belly with zoom lenses. The photos were transmitted immediately to Mission Control so experts can scour the images for any scrapes or holes.

A few pieces of foam insulation came off the external fuel tank during the launch, but none appeared to strike Endeavour.

The only oddity in the pictures from orbit was a protruding seal on the top of the left wing. The seal is part of a door for an access panel; about 4 inches of the 2- to 3-foot seal is sticking out.

Cain said the flapping seal poses no concern, but engineers will look into the matter to find out how it happened. Mission Control asked the station crew to take pictures of the seal, as the shuttle performed its somersault.

As for the rest of the wings and nose - the most vulnerable parts of the shuttle during re-entry - the laser inspection conducted earlier in the day by the [astronauts](#) was coming up empty. "Nothing that threw any unusual flags for us," Cain told reporters late Tuesday afternoon.

The rigorous checks were put in place following the 2003 Columbia disaster.

Three spacewalks are planned to hook up the 23-foot Tranquility - named after the Apollo 11 moon landing site - and the seven-windowed

dome. The first will get under way Thursday night.

Both compartments were built in Italy for the European Space Agency. Tranquility cost \$380 million and the lookout \$27 million.

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