

Shuttle Atlantis undocks from space station

May 23 2010, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



In this May 21, 2010 photo provided by NASA, astronauts Michael Good, foreground, and Garrett Reisman, STS-132 mission specialists, works during the flight's final space walk at the International Space Station. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- After a week of flying together, shuttle Atlantis undocked from a larger and virtually completed International Space Station on Sunday and headed for home on its final voyage.

"Have a safe trip back and godspeed to you," radioed the space station's skipper, Oleg Kotov.

Atlantis isn't due to land until Wednesday. On Monday, the six crewmen will conduct one last safety inspection of their ship.

"We'll see you all on the surface of planet Earth again soon," Atlantis' commander, Kenneth Ham, called out.

The two spacecraft parted company 220 miles above the Indian Ocean. Before the hatches closed between them, the commanding officers shook hands twice and laughed, then embraced. Their crewmates - representing the United States, Russia and Japan - followed suit.

Earlier in the day, Ham told reporters that both crews had fun. All 12 space fliers bonded through hard work and performed as a single team, he said. Mission Control reveled in the camaraderie as well, and lead flight director Emily Nelson relayed her appreciation as Atlantis sailed away from the orbiting outpost.

The space station is bigger and packs more power, thanks to Atlantis and its crewmen. They left behind a new Russian compartment packed with supplies, as well as six fresh batteries and other equipment that was hooked up during a series of spacewalks.

Its total mass exceeds 816,000 pounds, and it's 98 percent complete in terms of living space.

"This place is now a palace. It's huge, and I've had great fun exploring it," said shuttle astronaut Piers Sellers. "We're seeing station in pretty much its final form, and it's really magnificent."

Two shuttle missions remain to wrap up NASA's share of construction. Discovery is scheduled to fly in September, followed by Endeavour in November.

As it currently stands, once Atlantis lands, it will never fly in space again.

NASA and some politicians are pushing hard for another mission, however, so Atlantis can haul up a final load of supplies in June 2011. The White House - which wants NASA concentrated on getting

astronauts to asteroids and Mars in the coming decades - would need to approve any extra flights.

Already, [NASA](#) is going through the list of museums interested in Atlantis and Endeavour. Discovery is promised to the Smithsonian Institution.

During a news conference Sunday morning, the Atlantis astronauts were asked where they would like to see their ship wind up. Pilot, Dominic "Tony" Antonelli pointed out that none of them gets to decide. But if he got to pick, Atlantis would retire to his backyard in Houston.

"I get plenty of letters from my home owners' association about leaving my garbage can out and not keeping my grass trimmed, but if I got Atlantis parked in my back yard, that would make all those letters just kind of disappear," Antonelli said with a smile.

As for Atlantis' more immediate future, the [astronauts](#) still need to survey its wings and nose in search of any damage. They'll perform the job Monday using the newly repaired inspection boom. A spacewalking crewman untangled a cable on the boom last week, allowing the TV camera on the end to tilt properly.

Over at the space station, meanwhile, three of the six residents soon will be checking out. Russia's Kotov, NASA's Timothy (TJ) Creamer and Japan's Soichi Noguchi will depart June 2 in a Soyuz capsule and aim for Kazakhstan.

After more than five months in orbit, Creamer said Sunday he can't wait to drink something without sipping through a straw and to eat food that stays on the plate. Noguchi yearns for a hot springs bath.

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