

# Space center abuzz over Atlantis' last launch

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NASA employees from the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala., pose for a photo near the space shuttle Atlantis Wednesday, May 12, 2010, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. The final launch of Atlantis is planned for Friday afternoon. (AP Photo/Terry Renna)

(AP) -- NASA is getting hit up for extra launch passes, and mission stickers and pins are flying off the shelf. Another Twittering crowd is descending on the space center. Even science fiction writers want in on the action.

Welcome to space shuttle Atlantis' 32nd and final voyage.

When Atlantis blasts off - show time is 2:20 p.m. Friday - only two more missions will remain before the [shuttle program](#) ends.

Besides equipment for the [International Space Station](#), Atlantis holds two big tool bins that are crammed full of shuttle and station memorabilia: flags, medallions, bookmarks and the like.

Three miles from the pad, the firing room where launch controllers will give one final "go" is decorated with photos of Atlantis launching, flying in space and landing over the past 25 years. The collage includes patches from each mission, including the last, which depicts Atlantis sailing into the sunset.

Perhaps the only people in town who refuse to fuss over Atlantis' last flight are the six astronauts who will ride the rocketship into the history books. That's because NASA's future is fuzzy. Hope persists that Atlantis will ride yet again, launch director Mike Leinbach noted Wednesday.

"The six of us are calling this the first last flight of Atlantis and I think that's appropriate because we really don't know what she's going to do next," explained commander Kenneth Ham.

Shuttle managers prefer calling it Atlantis' "last planned flight."

What they mean is that when Atlantis returns from its 12-day trip, it won't be dismantled and head off to a museum. Instead, [NASA](#) will prep the shuttle as usual for a possible [rescue mission](#) for the very last flight, Endeavour's in November.

Assuming no rescue mission is needed - and none has yet - just about everybody at NASA would like to launch Atlantis anyway with a load of supplies. After all, it will be primed to fly with a [fuel tank](#) and a set of

boosters. NASA's top officials would like a heads-up from the White House by the end of June.

"One last hurrah," is how longtime astronaut Jerry Ross puts it.

Ross, now a NASA manager, is one of only two people to fly in space seven times - five on Atlantis.

At a news conference last week, Ross rattled down the list of Atlantis-by-the-numbers: 31 flights, 282 days in orbit, 116 million miles, 4,462 orbits of Earth, 185 crew members.

The upcoming mission will tack on 12 days, 186 orbits, 4 million miles and four astronauts.

Atlantis made its debut in 1985 as the fourth in NASA's vaulted space shuttle series, and went on to launch NASA's Venus-bound Magellan, Jupiter-bound Galileo and Compton Gamma Ray Observatory. It flew seven times to Russia's old Mir space station and 10 times to the International Space Station. It carried out the final Hubble Space Telescope repair mission last May.

"This is never going to be routine, and it's something I'm really going to miss seeing," Ross said.

Nonetheless, Ross said it's time the space shuttles stop flying. Like everyone else at NASA, he wishes there wasn't such a big gap between the last shuttle mission and the first manned flight of the next program, whatever and whenever that proves to be.

President Barack Obama wants private companies to take over carrying astronauts to the space station so NASA can focus on getting astronauts to an asteroid by 2025 and to Mars by 2035. President George Bush, in

2004, had set NASA's sights on the moon. Obama axed that program - which had fallen behind schedule - earlier this year.

Adding to the Atlantis fanfare, NASA invited 150 people to take part in a launch-day tweet-up at Kennedy [Space Center](#). It's only the second such affair; the first was in November. NASA expects the group to reach nearly 200,000 people via Twitter updates as they witness Atlantis' grand finale.

The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, meanwhile, scheduled its Nebula Awards conference in nearby Cocoa Beach to coincide with the [launch](#).

Flight director Mike Sarafin expects the mission to be conducted with "a little bit of reverence." Other than that, there will be no difference in how it's managed, he noted.

The Atlantis crew will perform three spacewalks to replace batteries and install spare parts at the space station, which NASA plans to keep running until 2020.

"Whether it's the last, last flight, time will tell," said astronaut Michael Good, who will perform two of the spacewalks. "But I don't think it's going to hit us until sometime after we land, to realize, hey, that was it."

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