

Astronauts open up world to Earthlings via photos

November 20 2010, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



This image provided by NASA and posted to Twitpic by astronaut Douglas Wheelock on Nov. 18, 2010 shows the Aurora Borealis as seen from the International Space Station. Earthlings are seeing their planet in a whole new light, thanks to NASA and its astronauts aboard the Internet-wired space station. They're beaming down dazzling images and guess-this-mystery-location photos via Twitter. (AP Photo/NASA via Twitpic, Douglas Wheelock)

(AP) -- Earthlings are seeing their planet in a whole new light, thanks to NASA and its astronauts aboard the Internet-wired space station. They're beaming down dazzling images and guess-this-mystery-location photos via Twitter and have even launched a game. Landlubbers the world over are eating it up. From schoolchildren to grown-up business entrepreneurs and artists, the public is captivated and can't seem to get enough.

It's clear from the [photos](#) why orbiting astronauts rate Earth-gazing as

their favorite pastime.

"The Earth never disappoints," the commander of the [International Space Station](#), Douglas Wheelock, said in a broadcast interview Thursday.

Known to his nearly 68,000 [Twitter](#) followers as Astro-Wheels, Wheelock has been posting impressive photos of the Earth and some of his thoughts ever since he moved into the space station in June, five months after it got Internet access.

"It's been a real thrill to be able to do that," said Wheelock.

Wheelock's photos this week included Mount Fuji in Japan as well as the aurora borealis, or northern lights, with a glittering space station solar wing in the foreground.

"Aurora Borealis as I will forever paint it in my dreams. Almost time to return home," wrote Wheelock, whose mission ends next week.

Jason Major, a Dallas-based graphic designer for a sunglass company, responded with a "beautiful" via Twitter.

"Just to get a perspective like that from 225 miles up is really incredible," Major told The Associated Press on Friday. "As I sit here at my desk and go about my day, to see what they're doing and their perspective of the world is really amazing."

Major has a website <http://www.lightsinthedark.com> to showcase snapshots of "our cosmic backyard." He provides links to some of the astronauts' photos.

"When they're looking down, we're looking up at the same time," said

Major. "It's not just these quote-unquote dusty, old [NASA](#) archive photos that you're looking at. You're looking at something as it's happening right now."

The space station's newest American resident, Scott Kelly, has gotten into the act and already has nearly 10,000 followers on Twitter from around the world. Just this week, he kicked off a geography trivia game, posting an image of twinkling lights at night and what looks to be the outline of a boot.

"This country's contributions to science include the barometer, electric battery, nitroglycerin and wireless telegraphy to boot. Name it!" Kelly wrote in his Twitter account Monday.

Most guessed Italy, including MrsQclasstweets.

Mrs. Q is actually Heather Quasny, a third-grade math and science teacher at Ralph Parr Elementary School in League City, Texas, just several miles from NASA's Johnson Space Center. She said her students enjoy trying to identify a place on Earth from an actual photo rather than an atlas or map. It's a way to excite a new generation of learners, she said.

"It's really cool to see them so engaged," she said.

For Quasny, the photos provide an opportunity to discuss space station life with her students.

"One of the things we talk about are, what are they actually doing up there? What is the point? They don't go up there for a good time," said Quasny, who happens to be married to a space station flight controller.

Eileen Hughes, who runs an online fabric shop with her daughter in

Pennsauken, N.J., looks forward to getting the astronauts' pictures. She was fascinated with this week's "mystery island" shot by Wheelock, which turned out to be Juan de Nova Island near Madagascar.

"It's awesome," she said.

As for Kelly's game - which will continue throughout his six-month mission - he announced a winner Friday afternoon. It was the first person to answer correctly, via a tweet.

"Now play," he urged.

More information:

NASA: <http://tinyurl.com/2e8jelf>

Astronauts on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/NASA/astronauts-in-space-now>

Lights in the Dark: <http://www.lightsinthedark.com>

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