

# Soyuz crew blasts off on space station mission

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U.S. astronaut Catherine Coleman, left, and Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli, crew members of the mission to the International Space Station, ISS, gesture prior the launch of Soyuz-FG rocket at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2010. (AP Photo/Dmitry Lovetsky)

(AP) -- Astronauts from the U.S., Russia and Italy blasted off into the darkness early Thursday, lighting up the chilly plains of Kazakhstan with their Soyuz spacecraft as they began a mission to the International Space Station.

Russia's Dmitry Kondratyev, NASA astronaut Catherine Coleman and the European Space Agency's Paolo Nespoli of Italy rode into space on the Soyuz TMA-20, which plans to dock at the orbiting laboratory on Friday.

Nine minutes after takeoff, a plush toy tiger that Coleman brought as the crew's mascot began floating in front of her, signaling the beginning of [weightlessness](#) as the spaceship reached an altitude of more than 125 miles (200 kilometers) above Earth, according to NASA television footage.

The flight caps a decade of manned missions to the space station, which began in October 2000.

The departure of the Soyuz had been pushed back several days due a last-minute replacement of its re-entry module, which had been damaged during unloading earlier this year at the [Baikonur cosmodrome](#) in the Central Asian steppes.

Replacing a key module so late in launch schedule had caused some apprehension, although Kondratyev shrugged such worries off at a final press conference.

"All the procedures needed to check the integrity of the ship have been completed, and all those have shown positive results," Kondratyev said.

Following the Russian space agency's rigorously timed launch routine, the astronauts left the hotel that has been their home for the last two weeks seven hours before the launch, boarding a bus to the strains of a traditional Soviet-era rock song.

After suiting up, carrying their suit-cooling equipment in one hand, the three bid a final salute to Russian Federal Space Agency chief Anatoly Perminov, then headed off to the [launch pad](#), past a scrum of photographers and relatives waving goodbye.

As the crew squeezed into the spaceship's tight three-person berth, technicians ran final tests to ensure the integrity of the craft.

As one of the tallest astronauts ever to go to space, the two-day trip will likely prove uncomfortable for the 6-foot, 4-inch (1.92-meter) tall Nespoli, who has described riding in the Soyuz as squeezing into a small car.

The launch took off from the same pad where Russia's Yuri Gagarin blasted off in 1961 on his mission to become the first human in space. The crew will be at the space station in April to mark the 50th anniversary of that mission.

International space operations will enter a new phase next year after the U.S. shuttle fleet is mothballed. Two more shuttle missions are planned, after which the Soyuz will be the only vehicle available to transport crews to the orbiting laboratory.

Russia profited handsomely from that monopolist position when it signed contracts for carrying NASA astronauts to the space station up to the end of 2014. A round-trip ticket to the space station in 2011 and 2012 will cost NASA as much as \$51 million, up from the current \$26 million. The price will jump to \$56 million in 2013 and 2014.

The White House wants NASA focused on next-generation rockets and spacecraft that could carry astronauts to asteroids and Mars, and hopes to rely on private business to develop craft capable of ferrying cargo and crew to the space station. Last week, Space Exploration Technologies Corp. of Hawthorne, California, conducted a second test launch of its Dragon capsule, and safely guided it back to Earth for the first time.

The company plans to send the Dragon to the space station next summer and then build its piloted version to deliver crews there.

Russia's Federal Space Agency chief Anatoly Perminov welcomed the Dragon's success, saying Wednesday it would alleviate the burden of

Russia's space program. "This will be very good for Russia, because by having a reserve vehicle, we will free up our own resources," he said.

Reflecting the increasingly international flavor of space missions, the three astronauts flying Thursday all come from different countries - a development hailed by Nespoli.

"If we want to keep going on with this exploration, going back to the moon or Mars ... we need to put together all the resources that are around the world," he said.

Nespoli's family and friends watched the takeoff from his hometown in Verano Brianza, near Milan, where his two young nieces held up a sign saying "You have wings - Fly!" Nespoli's sister Antonella said he had told his family Wednesday: "Please, make a great party."

Despite all the diplomatic bonhomie, national differences still persist when it comes to culinary tastes.

Nespoli has been churning out a steady stream of Twitter messages, including one jokingly complaining about a recent breakfast in Baikonur of over-boiled pasta and chicken.

"As Italians, we have a very strict way of eating, and that breakfast broke every single rule that we have," Nespoli told reporters.

The astronaut also told the ANSA news agency that he planned to transmit Twitter updates from the space station as "AstroPaolo."

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