

Astronauts head to ISS on spaceship Gagarin (Update 3)

April 4 2011, by Alexander Nemenov



A Russian Soyuz TMA-21 rocket with an International space crew of a US astronaut Ron Garan, Russian cosmonauts Alexander Samokutyayev and Andrei Borisenko blasts off from a Russian-leased Kazakh Baikonur cosmodrome to the International Space Station (ISS).

Three astronauts on Tuesday blasted off for the International Space Station in a spaceship named after the first man in space Yuri Gagarin in honour of his historic flight 50 years ago.

The two Russians and one American left on a Soyuz rocket from the main launchpad at Russia's Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, the same location where Gagarin went on his historic space mission on April 12, 1961.

The flight in the early hours of the morning left a bright beam of light against the background of the clear starry sky over the vast Kazakh steppe, an AFP correspondent reported.

Their mission has been dedicated to Gagarin's flight -- which gave the Soviet Union its greatest Cold War victory over the United States -- and their Soyuz capsule is named after and even inscribed with the name of the cosmonaut.

"The flight is normal," mission control told the crew, who waved and gave the thumbs-up sign to a camera relaying images from the capsule back to Earth.

Cosmonauts Alexander Samokutyaev and Andrei Borisenko are making their first space flight while US astronaut Ronald Garan is making his second mission, having already flown on US shuttle Discovery in 2008.

"We are feeling good," said the voice of one of the crew, apparently flight commander Samokutyaev. "I wish you success and a good flight," said the head of Russia's space agency, Anatoly Perminov.

As well as his name, the exterior of the Soyuz capsule is decorated with a picture of Gagarin in his iconic space suit and also the famous "Let's Go!" slogan he pronounced at blast off in 1961.

The craft successfully went into Earth orbit and is due to dock with the ISS at 2318 GMT on Wednesday, after a two-day journey.

The mission is a centrepiece of celebrations for the half century of manned spaceflight and there had been worries it could miss the anniversary after a technical problem forced a delay from the original March 30 lift-off date.

Russian state television said the crew were taking a recording of the famous radio exchanges between Gagarin in his tiny capsule and chief Soviet rocket designer Sergei Korolyov on the ground from half a century ago.

Also going to space was an icon presented by the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as a small toy dog presented by Samokutyaev's daughter.

Gagarin's 108-minute mission -- which ended with him parachuting down into a rural area of central Russia -- came at the height of the Cold War but these days the spaceflight is promoted as a joint endeavour between the former foes.

Russia's Soyuz delivery system will later this year become the sole means for taking humans to the ISS when NASA takes its shuttle out of service, leaving the United States reliant on the more rudimentary Russian technology.

The United States is due to launch the shuttle Endeavour on April 29 and Atlantis is set for its final mission in June, marking the end of the US space shuttle program after 30 years.

At the time of Gagarin's flight, even the location of the Baikonur cosmodrome was a tightly-guarded secret and the presence of Americans anywhere near would have been unthinkable.

In the pre-flight press conference at Baikonur, NASA astronaut Ronald Garan played up the emotions of international harmony by reciting -- in Russian -- verses of a poem by romantic Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov.

Garan has described his involvement in the mission as an "incredible

honour", saying that from Gagarin's flight "humanity became a different species ... humanity was no longer bounded to the confines of the Earth".

Refusing to break with tradition in any way, the astronauts watched the classic Soviet "Eastern" movie "White Sun of the Desert" which has been ritual viewing ahead of Baikonur lift-offs since its release in 1969.

The three -- who will spend the next six months in space -- will join on board NASA astronaut Catherine Coleman, Europe's Paolo Nespoli and Russian cosmonaut Dmitry Kondratyev.

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