

Unprecedented photo op for shuttle-space station

May 23 2011, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer



This image provided by NASA shows the intersecting thin line of Earth's atmosphere with the International Space Station's solar array wings photographed Thursday May 20, 2011 by an STS-134 crew member while space shuttle Endeavour remains docked with the station. (AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- In an unprecedented cosmic photo shoot Monday, a departing spaceship snapped close-up glamour pictures of the space shuttle Endeavour attached to the International Space Station.

And the linked station-shuttle did what any good fashion model does. It slowly turned and pivoted on its orbital runway. That maneuver was so

that Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli, clicking away inside a Russian Soyuz capsule, could get good digital photos and video.

The Soyuz hovered in space while the shuttle-station rotated 129 degrees.

Minutes earlier, the Russian capsule had backed away from the space station, carrying Nespoli and two other station residents back to Earth after a five-month stay. They landed safely about five hours later in Kazakhstan.

A Soyuz has never headed for home while a shuttle was parked at the space station. The shuttle program is ending and Endeavour is making the next-to-last flight, so it won't happen again.

"It's unprecedented and we worked hard to get here," space station flight director Derek Hassmann said earlier Monday.

Nespoli took the pictures from about 600 feet - about two football fields away. But in this era of instant gratification, NASA engineers, who said this was more for engineering than beauty purposes, were going to have to wait until Tuesday to pour over the photos.

The Soyuz wasn't able to send the high quality pictures back to Earth live. NASA expected to get them sometime after the capsule lands.

Soyuz commander Dmitry Kondratyev asked Nespoli, who had the best view in the Soyuz upper portion: "Is it beautiful?"

"It's nice, very, very nice," Nespoli responded.

Nespoli, as planned, left the cameras in part of the Soyuz that burns up in space, but he made sure the digital photo cards returned to Earth with

him. And if he didn't do it himself, mission controllers reminded him a couple times.

This was such a one-of-a-kind event that even though Endeavour's crew was supposed to be asleep, they were allowed to wake a couple hours early if they wanted to watch the orbital ballet.

NASA engineers on Earth were happy with the little they were able to see and were looking forward to the photos. "I think we're going to get some fantastic images," said flight director Dana Weigel.

After the picture taking, the Soyuz - carrying Nespoli, American astronaut Catherine Coleman and Kondratyev - fired its engines and headed back to Earth.

Their departure leaves three space station residents, as well as Endeavour's six-man crew commanded by Mark Kelly, husband of wounded Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. Endeavour's final flight ends June 1.

Two of Kelly's crewmates late Monday night praised his ability to handle both the personal difficulties from the Jan. 8 assassination attempt on Giffords and the demanding task of running a space shuttle flight.

"Mark is a very good compartmentalizer," pilot Greg Johnson said in a television interview. "He's very caring and responsive to what his wife, Gabby, needs, but he doesn't leave us uncommanded. He's a strong commander, a capable commander, and he could do both."

The space station suffered a small electrical glitch that took down communications with experiments for about five hours, but everything has been fixed, Weigel said.

The astronauts got another VIP call from Rome earlier Monday from

Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, two days after Pope Benedict XVI called. Napolitano spoke with Nespoli and the Italian member of Endeavour's crew, Roberto Vittori. The spacemen held up an Italian flag that Vittori received from the president to mark the 150 anniversary of Italy's unification and flapped it between them.

"It's a little hard to make the flag fly in the absence of gravity," explained Nespoli, who carried the flag back to Earth with him.

More information: NASA: <http://www.nasa.gov/shuttle>

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