

# Russian spacecraft blasts off for space station

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(AP) -- A Russian spacecraft blasted off from southern Kazakhstan in the early darkness of Wednesday morning to take a three-man crew to the International Space Station.

Russian cosmonaut Sergei Volkov, NASA's Michael Fossum, and Satoshi Furukawa of Japan roared into the night sky from the desolate but balmy Kazakh Steppe early Wednesday.

Furukawa held a thumbs-up as the rocket charged into low orbit at speeds approaching 14,000 miles per hour (23,000 kilometers per hour), and a soft toy began to float, indicating zero gravity.

"We feel just great," Volkov said in answer to a question from mission control outside Moscow.

The trio will spend almost two days in the cramped Soyuz capsule before docking with the space station, where they will remain until mid-November.

Upon docking at the station, the crew will join the current station members - NASA's Ron Garan and Russian cosmonauts Andrei Borisenko and Alexander Samokutyayev.

Family, friends and colleagues of the astronauts watched the powerful rocket cast a phosphorous glow over the Russian-leased Baikonur space launch site deep inside the territory of the former Soviet nation at 2:15

a.m local time (2015 GMT Tuesday).

This is the second run for the revamped version of the Soyuz, which has served as the workhorse of the Russian space program for decades.

While aboard the ISS, the team will witness the final mission of the U.S. shuttle, with NASA retiring the 30-year program after Atlantis flies on July 8.

South Dakota native Fossum, 53, is the oldest member of the outbound crew and has been closely involved with the design and assembly of the International Space Station.

"(I) helped design the space station, I helped build it on two assembly flights, and now to have the opportunity to live there is just amazing," he said before lift-off.

Patrick Buzzard, NASA's representative to Russia, said the two countries have relied and one another over the recent history of space exploration and that nothing was set to change.

"It is such a strong partnership and we have these capabilities that everyone brings to the table. That makes it a more robust program," Buzzard told The Associated Press at the Baikonur launch pad viewing platform.

Fossum said "his crew would have to hit the ground running" to make sure they keep up. Together with Garan, they are scheduled for a spacewalk during the shuttle's visit.

"It is going to be a very busy time, so we are going to have a lot of preparation to do," Fossum said.

U.S. astronauts have frequently expressed a sense of melancholy over the shuttle program being wound down, but Fossum said he was satisfied that the craft had completed its mission.

"The shuttle has completed its primary mission - hauling big pieces of the space station to lower earth orbit and helping to assemble the space station," he said. "We are going to miss the shuttle's capabilities, because ... they are awesome and unmatched."

It will be several years before NASA replaces its shuttle fleet, leaving it wholly reliant on the Russian space program to transport its personnel. Meanwhile, the privately run California-based space transportation company SpaceX is developing the Dragon craft that NASA hopes could also offer it another, possibly less costly, alternative.

The \$56 million price that the Russian Space Agency charges NASA to send up astronauts is set to go up to \$63 million per passenger from 2014. A recent contract extension with the agency totaled \$753 million and covered trips for a dozen NASA astronauts from 2014 through 2016.

At Baikonur, where families nervously watched their loved ones go through the heart-stopping routine of flying into orbit, thoughts were more prosaically devoted to coming months apart.

Fossum put it best as he expressed the conflict of emotions endured by professional astronauts.

"On Earth, we dream about being in space. When we're in space, we dream about being at home."

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