

Astronauts getting time off in space, finally

July 14 2011, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



This image provided by NASA shows a high angle view of the Cupola, backdropped against the darkness of space and Earth's horizon, and some components of the International Space Station. The astronauts making NASA's last shuttle flight turned into moving men and garbage haulers Wednesday July 13, 2011 with no time to dwell on their place in space history, after enjoying a special salute from the original "Rocket Man," Elton John.(AP Photo/NASA)

(AP) -- After a hectic week in orbit, the astronauts on NASA's last space shuttle flight got some time off Thursday to savor their historic experience.

"This is one of the first days we've been able to take a deep breath and appreciate what we're doing up here," said space shuttle Atlantis' commander, Christopher Ferguson.

Until Thursday, the workload in orbit was so intense that the four astronauts had only fleeting moments of realizing "wow, this is really it,"

astronaut Rex Walheim said in a series of TV interviews.

"But boy, it's going to hit when we land and wheels stop," he added.

The 10 astronauts aboard the linked Atlantis and [International Space Station](#) got time to linger over the "all-American meal" of grilled chicken and barbecued beef brisket that [NASA](#) packed for them, complete with baked beans and Hostess apple pie.

NASA urged the public to share in the virtual dinner, publishing the recipes online in advance.

Before kicking back and relaxing, Ferguson said the space station delivery mission was going well and that the back-and-forth cargo hauling was three-quarters completed.

"Atlantis is purring like a kitten," he said. "I think she's about 25 years or so old, but she performs just like a newborn."

Atlantis first rocketed into orbit in 1985. This is its 33rd flight and the 135th [shuttle mission](#) overall. Atlantis will join Discovery and Endeavour in retirement, following its landing next week.

The space shuttle delivered nearly 5 tons of food, clothes and other household goods in a giant canister to the space station - an entire year's worth of supplies. NASA wants the orbiting lab well stocked in case private companies fall behind in their effort to take over shuttle supply runs. The first such commercial flight is expected by year's end.

While the unmanned [cargo ships](#) are smaller than NASA's shuttles, Ferguson pointed out there are many more of them, launching from all over the world. But the craft burn up in the atmosphere after they undock.

"From a return standpoint, bringing things back from the space station and getting them to Earth, we're going to miss the [space shuttle](#)," he said.

Atlantis, for instance, will return more than 7,000 pounds of discarded equipment and trash from the space station, freeing up much needed room. Engineers will take apart some of the broken machinery to see what went wrong and, hopefully, learn from the mistakes.

Astronaut Sandra Magnus - who spent more than four months on the space station a few years back - said she's amazed at how much bigger it is now that it's finished. She said she sometimes thinks: "Wow, look what we did. We built this huge, huge, monster laboratory orbiting the Earth, with cooperation from countries all over the world."

For the second day in a row, the four shuttle [astronauts](#) and six space station inhabitants began their day with a celebrity salute. On Wednesday, it was Elton John. On Thursday, it was Michael Stipe, lead singer for rock band R.E.M. In a prerecorded message, Stipe sang an abbreviated "a cappella" version of the band's 1992 song, "Man on the Moon."

Three of the [space station](#) crew, meanwhile, marked their 100th day in space Thursday: Ronald Garan Jr. and Russians Andrey Borisenko and Alexander Samokutyaev. They will remain on board until September.

Atlantis' trip, by comparison, is a scant 13 days. It will undock Tuesday and aim for a Florida homecoming Thursday to close out the 30-year shuttle program.

A TV broadcaster asked Ferguson if he'll make "a Neil Armstrong type statement" at touchdown. Atlantis will miss landing on the 42nd anniversary of Armstrong's "one small step for man" speech by one day; by adding a day to the mission earlier this week, NASA bumped

Atlantis' homecoming to July 21.

"I put some thought into how we're going to reflect on the moment," Ferguson said, "and perhaps we'll just save that until the wheels-stop call and we'll let you know then."

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