

Tailgate party to remember for last shuttle launch

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Doug Chambers reacts as the countdown reaches 10 seconds to liftoff for space shuttle Atlantis Friday, July 8, 2011, in Titusville, Fla. Four astronauts are taking space shuttle Atlantis for one last ride, the very last one of the 30-year space shuttle era. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)

(AP) -- It was a tailgate party for the ages. They came packing tents and camp chairs, coolers and snacks, Sudoku books and laptops, parking cars and RVs in almost every available space along U.S. 1 to witness history blasting off in the haze across the Indian River.

The mood was festive but a little wistful Friday as they waited for Atlantis to lift off, the nation's final [space shuttle launch](#) after 30 years and 135 missions.

After fretful hours of watching the cloudy, threatening skies, they were

rewarded. Packed body-to-body along the river, they counted down the last 10 seconds before the launch, about 10 miles away. A cheer arose as billowing smoke appeared, then the ball of fire as the shuttle sped into the clouds.

After a delay, came the ground-shaking roar thundering across the water and through the throng.

"It's just such a majestic sight," said 24-year-old Jessica Andes, from Celebration, Fla. "We'll never see it again."

NASA expected before launch about 750,000 to 1 million people to descend on the region. The Brevard County Sheriff's Office declined to make a guess on Friday. But a spokesman, Lt. Todd Maddox, noted there was total gridlock, no traffic moving more than an hour after launch.

David Hill, 52, and his 15-year-old daughter, Tanya, got in their red Subaru Outback Tuesday and drove down from Sutton, N.H. They arrived at 6 a.m. Friday and wedged their car in among the others parked in all directions along the highway. They came two years ago to see a launch and missed it because it was canceled.

"I wanted to feel the power of 7 million pounds of thrust coming across that water there, I wanted to feel it on my chest," said Hill, who drives a school bus back home. "I wanted to experience it. You can't experience it watching NASA TV. That's why we're here. If we don't do it now, we never will."

Ed Gerrish and five members of his family arrived Thursday night from North Port, Fla., on the other side of the state, parking their hulking RV along U.S. 1, just feet from the river. They promptly got it stuck in the sand so had to stay put.

"It's the end of something that a lot of us have grown up with," said Gerrish, a 45-year-old equipment operator who was seeing his first shuttle launch after putting it off for years. "I don't know if an opportunity to see something like this is going to come along again. ... It's sad. A lot of people don't understand why they're going the way they are. You grow up with something like this, and it's just sad to see it go away."

At the Dogs 'R' Us restaurant across the road, the sign out front said "God Speed Atlantis," adding helpfully that "Kids Eat Free." Cars were parked in all directions in the restaurant lot, and shuttle watchers staked out available ground with their camp chairs and blankets. A vendor sold T-shirts commemorating the final shuttle mission from beneath a tent nearby

Jennifer Caslick, from Ontario, Canada, noted that the happiness and excitement in the air was tinged with the sad realization that the shuttle era was ending.

"It's unfortunate that there isn't something to replace it," said Caslick, 35. But maybe all this interest "will give them a little more push to getting something going that can be just as supported as the [space shuttle](#) program was."

Caslick drove two days with her husband Todd to get here. They slept in the car and got up before dawn to stake out a prime viewing spot at the end of the long dock near Rotary Riverfront Park, surrounded by hundreds of others who had the same idea. They had lost their 7-year-old son Benjamin, who had cerebral palsy, in April and had uploaded his photo to a NASA website so it could be taken into space aboard Atlantis.

"We wanted to be here to see it go," she said.

After its 12-day, 4-million-mile mission, Atlantis will join Discovery and Endeavour in retirement, so [NASA](#) can focus on sending astronauts to asteroids and Mars. Private companies will take over the business of getting space station cargo and crews to orbit.

"I'm a little bit sad about it, and a little bit wistful," said Jennifer Cardwell who came with her husband John and two young sons from Fairhope, Ala. "I've grown up with it. The space shuttle lifted off when I was a little girl for the first time, and now for it to be ending and not knowing that there was going to be anything after it. That's why it was so important for me to be here."

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