

# Tourists jam Florida for glimpse of last shuttle launch

July 7 2011, by Kerry Sheridan

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Mark Dojciechowski (L) and Amy Wohlwend from Atlanta, Georgia eat breakfast outside their camper ahead of the launch of Space Shuttle Atlantis in Titusville, Florida. Tourists crowded into central Florida Thursday as NASA forged ahead with plans to launch Atlantis on the final mission of the US shuttle program.

Tourists crowded into central Florida on Thursday as NASA forged ahead with plans to launch Atlantis on the final mission of the US shuttle program despite stormy weather.

Up to 750,000 people are expected to pack Florida's "Space Coast" for a glimpse of the last shuttle liftoff, set for Friday at 11:26 am (1526 GMT), before the three-decade program closes forever.

But a lightning strike near the launch pad and ominous warnings of clouds and rain moving in from the tropics threatened to delay the shuttle's last ever journey to the orbiting International Space Station.

"Weather is not looking good for launch," said shuttle weather officer Kathy Winters, adding there was a 70 percent chance that bad weather would prevent the shuttle from taking off.

A passing thunderstorm briefly delayed final inspections on the launch pad Thursday, and lightning struck a third of a mile (half kilometer) from the launch pad on Thursday afternoon.



Storm clouds move into the area as Space Shuttle Atlantis sits on Launch Pad 39A at Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Up to 750,000 people are expected to

pack Florida's "Space Coast" for a glimpse of the last shuttle liftoff, set for Friday at 11:26 am (1526 GMT), before the three-decade program closes forever.

Space agency managers called a meeting at 4:30 pm (2030 GMT) to discuss their inspections after the lightning strike, as part of ongoing talks throughout the day to decide if conditions would allow them to proceed.

"If we get into a scenario where we scrub very late in the count we would probably (go to) a 48 hour scrub scenario... to give our teams a chance to get home and get back to work," said Jeff Spaulding, NASA test director.

That could mean the next launch attempt would be Sunday, when weather conditions improve to 60 percent likelihood of favorable conditions.

However, Spaulding stressed that if Friday's bid is scrapped, launch opportunities remain open on both Saturday and Sunday. NASA is also discussing the possibility of launching on July 11, but that option is not yet confirmed.

If the shuttle is not delayed by weather, throngs of space fans who hope to catch a clear view of the fiery blast off could be disappointed due to gray skies and low clouds, according to Winters.

An 8,000 foot (2,400 meter) cloud ceiling around the area on Friday means "if they are on the coast here they will see it up to that point," said Winters.

Hotel signs in Cocoa Beach bragged about offering the best views to tourists while waiters and waitresses chatted at length with visiting diners about the upcoming launch and the end of the shuttle program.

As many as 8,000 local jobs are being cut from Kennedy Space Center as the shuttle program ends, delivering a staggering blow to a resort area that has largely depended on space-related interest for tourist dollars and income.

"There are a lot of people who have worked so hard on this and have so much knowledge and they will all go away," said Nicole Solomon, 35, a producer who is visiting from California to watch the launch in person.



George Bailey, from Sherwood, Arkansas, uses mosquito netting and a tarp as he camps out waiting to watch the launch of Space Shuttle Atlantis in Titusville, Florida. He arrived two days ago in order to get a good spot to watch the launch of Atlantis for its scheduled lift-off on Friday for a mission to the space station.

"My whole life I grew up with the space shuttle," she added. "I'll watch the mission and I'll watch the landing and probably shed a few tears. Yeah. Yeah. It's definitely sad."

Another visitor to Kennedy Space Center, Mitu Khandaker, 27, a game designer from Britain, said the opportunity to watch the last launch in person was "a dream come true."

"I wanted to be an astronaut when I was small -- I think everyone did -- and this is probably the closest I am going to get," she told AFP.

"The rain and the weather are just kind of threatening at the moment, hopefully it won't be a problem."

The shuttle, carrying a skeleton crew of four US astronauts, is headed on a 12-day re-supply mission to the International Space Station.

Once Atlantis returns, it will remain at Kennedy Space Center as a tourist attraction, while the other four US shuttles take their places in museums across the country.

The first US shuttle flight took place in 1981. Over the years, the shuttle toted heavy cargo and up to seven crew at a time to the International Space Station and back.

When the US program ends, the ability of astronauts to travel to low-Earth orbit will be restricted to transit aboard the three-seat Russian Soyuz space capsules.

Private US companies are competing to build a next-generation space capsule that will once again carry Americans into space, but such plans are not expected to be complete before 2015.

Meanwhile, near the countdown clock at Kennedy Space Center, the US space agency showed off its design for the next multi-purpose crew vehicle which aims to take astronauts to deep space destinations like Mars or an asteroid in the coming years.

"Americans are going to be in space for the foreseeable future," said NASA administrator Charles Bolden.

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