

US museum to welcome space shuttle Discovery

April 19 2012, by Kerry Sheridan



Space shuttle Discovery sits on the back of a NASA's Boeing 747 Shuttle Carrier Aircraft in Washington DC on April 17. Discovery on Thursday will become the first spaceship of the retired US shuttle fleet to enter its permanent home as a museum artifact, marking a solemn end to the 30-year US space flight program.

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A team of about 20 veteran astronauts who flew to [space](#) aboard Discovery will surround the celebrated spacecraft and escort it to a branch of the Smithsonian [National Air and Space Museum](#) outside the US capital.

Famous [space travelers](#), including astronaut John Glenn, who was the first American to orbit the Earth in 1962 and later returned to space aboard Discovery in 1998, are scheduled to speak at the ceremony.

For several hours on Thursday, the [shuttle](#) will rest nose-to-nose on the tarmac with the prototype Enterprise, which has been on display at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in suburban Virginia but will soon move to New York.

Discovery is the first of the three remaining shuttles that flew in space to enter a [museum](#), where it will serve as a tourist attraction. The others, Endeavour and Atlantis, will follow in the coming months.

Two other shuttles, Challenger and Columbia, were destroyed in accidents. Challenger disintegrated shortly after liftoff in 1986 and Columbia broke apart on re-entry to Earth in 2003. Both disasters killed everyone on board.

The oldest surviving US shuttle, Discovery flew 39 missions to space beginning in 1984 and drew cheering crowds and some tears from onlookers earlier this week when it toured the skies over Washington one last time.

Discovery ended its last mission to space in March 2011, and the return to Earth of Atlantis in July 2011 marked the end of the US [shuttle program](#), leaving Russia as the only nation capable of sending astronauts to space.



The shuttle Enterprise sits in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center's McDonnell Space Hangar. Enterprise will head to New York City on April 23 to go on display at the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum.

Several private companies are competing to be the first to build a [space capsule](#) that would replace the US shuttles operated by NASA for three decades.

While a test cargo mission by [SpaceX](#) to the [International Space Station](#) is planned for April 30, the prospect of US-driven human space flight remains several years away.

In the meantime, museum officials were busily preparing for a host of dignitaries to say farewell to Discovery, headlined by John Glenn but also including NASA Administrator Charles Bolden and museum

director Jack Dailey.

Fourteen of the shuttle's 31 living commanders will be in attendance for the ceremony, which will feature the US Marine Drum and Bugle Corps.

Discovery toured the US capital Washington for nearly an hour on Tuesday, piggybacking atop a Boeing 747 that NASA keeps specifically for transporting shuttles.

The process of separating the shuttle from the aircraft, known as "demating" was expected to take about two days.

"By tomorrow morning Discovery will be on the ground, on its gear, and ready to be towed over to her new home as part of the national collection," museum spokesman Frank McNally told AFP on Wednesday.

Other artifacts on display at the museum include the Boeing B-29 Superfortress "Enola Gay," which in 1945 dropped the first atomic weapon used in combat on Hiroshima, Japan.

There is also a supersonic Concorde airliner donated to the museum by France and a single-seat Kugisho MXY7 Ohka (Cherry Blossom) 22 bomber used for attacks on Allied warships, which was captured from Japan in 1945.

Later this year, Endeavour will move from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida to the California Science Center in Los Angeles.

The shuttle Atlantis, also still in Florida, will make just a short hop to a new exhibit at the Kennedy Center's visitor complex.

Enterprise, a prototype shuttle that never flew in space, will head to New

York City on April 23 to go on display at the Intrepid Sea, [Air and Space Museum](#).

A storied space career for groundbreaking Discovery

NASA's most heavily traveled spacecraft, the shuttle Discovery, will make its permanent home in a museum Thursday after a storied, 27-year career that has broken ground in many ways.

Here are some facts about the shuttle and some of its most memorable moments.

- First mission, STS-41D, was on August 30, 1984, carrying six astronauts into orbit.
- Has completed 39 missions, more than any other space shuttle.
- Traveled more than 148 million miles in space.
- Spent 365 days in space.
- Carried the Hubble space telescope into orbit in April, 1990.
- Has twice been the first shuttle to return to orbit after a major disaster: in 1988 after Challenger exploded in 1986; and again in 2005 after Columbia disintegrated in 2003.
- Is the oldest shuttle in the three-member fleet, due to the demise of Columbia and Challenger, which were older.
- Was the first shuttle to be piloted by a woman, Eileen Collins, in 1995.
- First shuttle to be commanded by a woman, also Eileen Collins, in

1999.

- Carried the first African-American astronaut to perform a space walk, Bernard Harris, in 1995.
- Transported first sitting member of Congress, Senator Jake Garn, to space in 1985.
- Carried US Senator John Glenn to space in 1998 as a member of the STS-95 crew 36 years after his pioneering Mercury flight.
- Delivered part of Japan's Kibo laboratory to the ISS in 2008.
- Was the first shuttle to rendezvous with the Russian Mir Space Station in 1995.
- Has received 99 upgrades.
- Has transported 180 people in total.

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