

Smithsonian welcomes Discovery to space collection

April 19 2012, By BRETT ZONGKER , Associated Press



In this image provided by NASA the NASA 747 Shuttle Carrier Aircraft with the space shuttle Discovery mated on top rolls into position for demating at Washington Dulles International Airport, Wednesday, April 17, 2012, in Sterling, VA. Discovery, the first orbiter retired from NASA's shuttle fleet, completed 39 missions, spent 365 days in space, orbited the Earth 5,830 times, and traveled 148,221,675 miles. NASA will transfer Discovery to the National Air and Space Museum to begin its new mission to commemorate past achievements in space and to educate and inspire future generations of explorers. (AP Photo/NASA, Bill Ingalls)

(AP) -- Space shuttle Discovery is preparing to move into its new home

at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum annex in northern Virginia.

By Thursday morning, the world's most traveled spaceship had been lifted off its Boeing 747 carrier and towed to the museum near Dulles International Airport. Astronauts including former Sen. John Glenn will help deliver Discovery to its retirement as an artifact representing the 30-year [shuttle program](#).

A welcome ceremony is expected to draw thousands of visitors who want an up-close look at the shuttle after it flew over the Washington area Tuesday. The museum is hosting a four-day festival to showcase Discovery.

Curator Valerie Neal said Discovery will be displayed as if it just landed, with its large payload bay doors closed.

The top question museum visitors have been asking is whether they will be able to walk inside Discovery or see the flight deck, Neal said.

"We don't permit that here because we treat all of the aircraft and spacecraft as artifacts, not as exhibit props," she said. Allowing people to walk inside would require cutting a bigger hatch, among other modifications.

"To make the shuttle accessible to the public, we would have to damage it, and we just do not want to do that," Neal said.

Instead, the museum has created 360-degree interactive pictures of Discovery's flight deck and mid deck. Soon there will also be images of the payload bay accessible at kiosks near where Discovery will be displayed. That will allow visitors to have a view from the commander's seat and then float through the various compartments to explore the

shuttle. A companion exhibit at the museum on the National Mall will include a model of Discovery's mid deck where visitors can climb inside and see a shuttle toilet (think vacuum cleaner) and other features.

Discovery will be displayed in the exact place where the prototype shuttle Enterprise has been displayed in a massive space hangar in Virginia. Visitors will be able to view the shuttle from two levels in the museum. It is free to visit, though parking costs \$15.

Curators wanted to display the shuttle as it was after its last orbits in space. Some of its side panels are worn and discolored from exposure to the heat of re-entry to the atmosphere, and tiles on its underbelly show the streaks of fire from re-entry.

"We wanted it to look like it had been to space and back 39 times, and it does," Neal said.

The [museum](#) also is installing new artifacts around the shuttle, including the payload bay robotic arm built in Canada that was used for missions on Discovery.

Panels around Discovery will explain its historic accomplishments as the "champion of the shuttle fleet" and details about its engineering.

Discovery flew every type of mission during the 30-year shuttle program. It deployed satellites including Hubble, as well as top secret Defense Department missions in the 1980s with military astronauts on board. It also was the first shuttle to travel to the Russian space station Mir and to dock with the International Space Station.

"It is really the story of the whole 30-year space shuttle program," Neal said. Since the shuttle also was a larger vehicle than earlier spacecraft, "the [shuttle](#) made it possible to diversify the astronaut corps."

It opened new avenues to space for women and minority candidates in science and engineering who wouldn't have come through military test pilot programs. Neal said that brought "people who were indicative of the rest of us" into space.

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