

Shuttle to sightsee around California (Update)

September 21 2012, by Alicia Chang



In this photo provided by the Southwest Photo Bank, former U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and husband, former astronaut Mark Kelly, watch the Space Shuttle Endeavor fly over Tucson, Ariz. on its way to Los Angeles, Thursday, Sept. 20, 2012. Kelly, Endeavour's last commander, requested that the shuttle pass over Tucson to honor Giffords, who is recovering after suffering a head wound in a shooting rampage last year. (AP Photo/Southwest Photo Bank, P.K. Weis)

(AP)—Space shuttle Endeavour will spend its last flying day Friday not rocketing into space but doing what most tourists do when visiting California: Taking in the state Capitol, Golden Gate Bridge and the Hollywood Sign.

In what promises to be a crowd-rousing air show, Endeavour, strapped atop a 747 jumbo jet, will take off after sunrise from Edwards Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert and dip low over various landmarks in a 4 1/2-hour sightseeing flight before landing at the Los Angeles International Airport.

It's Endeavour's last aerial hurrah before it spends its retirement years as a museum piece.

Some 400 trees had to be cleared along the 12-mile (20-kilometer) route to make room for its trek from LAX, a move that has riled some residents in affected neighborhoods. Museum officials have pledged to replant double the number of chopped trees.

"We're so excited to be welcoming Endeavour home in grand style with these flyovers," said Jeffrey Rudolph, president of the California Science Center, where the shuttle will go on permanent display.

Since Endeavour will buzz by some of the Golden State's most iconic sights, law enforcement and transportation authorities warned motorists not to "gawk and drive."



The Space Shuttle Endeavour sits atop NASA's Shuttle Carrier Aircraft (SCA) at the NASA Dryden Flight Research Center at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., Thursday, Sept. 20, 2012. Endeavour returned to its California roots after a wistful cross-country journey that paid homage to NASA workers and former Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and her astronaut husband. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

"We want people to take in this majestic show," Los Angeles police Cmdr. Scott Kroeber said earlier this week. "But if you're driving, please drive and don't try to take in the show simultaneously."

Extra officers will be on duty along the freeways near LAX to make sure traffic flows smoothly as the shuttle zooms overhead.

Endeavour returned to its birthplace Thursday after an emotional cross-country ferry flight that made a special flyover of Tucson, Arizona, to honor its last commander, Mark Kelly, and his wife, former Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords.

Giffords, who is recovering from a gunshot wound to the head, was "hooting and hollering" as Endeavour looped around her hometown, according to her former aide C.J. Karamargin.

NASA's shuttle fleet, which retired last year after three decades of flight, was assembled in Palmdale near Edwards Air Force Base. The military outpost 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of Los Angeles served as the original shuttle landing strip and remained a backup site in case of stormy weather at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

The youngest shuttle, Endeavour replaced Challenger, which blew up during liftoff in 1986. NASA lost another shuttle, Columbia, in 2003 when it disintegrated during re-entry. Fourteen astronauts were killed.

During 25 missions, Endeavour spent 299 days in space and orbited Earth nearly 4,700 times, racking up 123 million miles (198 million kilometers).

On its maiden flight in 1992, a trio of spacewalking astronauts grabbed a stranded communications satellite in for repair. It also flew the first repair mission to the Hubble Space Telescope to fix a faulty mirror. But most of its flights ferried cargo and equipment to the International Space Station, which is near completion.

Under White House orders to explore beyond low-Earth orbit, NASA is hitching rides on Russian rockets to the orbiting laboratory until private companies can provide regular service.

Endeavour is the second of three remaining shuttles to head to its retirement home. In April, Discovery arrived at the Smithsonian Institution's hangar in Virginia. Atlantis, which closed out the shuttle program, will stay in Florida where it will be towed a short distance to the Kennedy Space Center's visitor center in the fall.

Endeavour will remain at an airport hangar for several weeks as crews ready the shuttle for its own road trip. Unlike Atlantis, it will creep through city streets to the California Science Center near downtown.

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