

# Space Shuttle Atlantis inspires generations of explorers

June 30 2013, by Dewayne Bevil

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Credit: NASA

With a giant question mark hovering over the future of the U.S. space program, the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex opened its \$100 million Space Shuttle Atlantis exhibit Saturday.

"A lot of people, when the space shuttle's final flight took place . . . sort of misunderstood that this was the end of the space program," said Bill Moore, chief operating officer of the visitor complex.

The absence of a straightforward goal for the [manned space program](#) - "We're going to go to Mars" - makes the future murky for the public, Moore said.

The new Space Shuttle Atlantis attraction in Brevard County, Fla., can help people understand that the program is in transition, he said.

For example, NASA is working with private companies on the Commercial Crew Program, which would send manned spacecraft from the U.S. to the International Space Station, and is planning a Space Launch System to take astronauts back into deep space, beyond the shuttle program's scope.

Now, the retired Atlantis shuttle lives in a 90,000-square-foot building, tilted at a 43-degree angle so that it's visible from multiple perspectives. The dusty and nicked orbiter is bathed in theatrical lighting and flanked by interactive stations to educate about the [shuttle program](#), which ended with Atlantis' touchdown at Kennedy Space Center in July 2011.

It's a view not usually seen by earthbound folks, said astronaut Tom Jones, who was on two of Atlantis' 33 missions.

"This is the way Atlantis is seen in orbit, by astronauts," he said. "You never get a chance to see the shuttle like that on Earth. It's always cocooned in scaffolding or maintenance platforms."

Jones and 39 other astronauts greeted hundreds of guests at the grand opening of the attraction Saturday morning.

The ceremony took place in the shadow of a replica of the solid [rocket boosters](#) and fuel tanks that lifted all 135 [shuttle missions](#) into space from the Florida coast.

Among the dignitaries were Bob Crippen, who flew on the first shuttle in 1981, and Chris Ferguson and Sandy Magnus, who were aboard the final flight in July 2011.

"I couldn't be more proud of the display of Atlantis," said Bob Cabana, a former astronaut and current director of the John F. Kennedy Space Center.

"We think they did it right," he said, speaking for the astronaut corps.

The attraction's location amid world-famous theme parks and sunny beaches has pros and cons, Moore said.

"On the marketing side, it's the most competitive place in the world," he said. "But on the other side, it's where everybody has to come."

NASA administrator Charles Bolden said Atlantis had a new mission.

"She'll inspire a new generation of explorers," he said.

He also thanked the KSC work force and the residents of the Space Coast.

"This nation owes you a super debt of gratitude," he said.

The attraction's target audience is "people who like science centers, who like to go to museums, who like to go to historically significant places," Moore said.

About half of the visitors to the [space center](#) complex come from outside the U.S., Moore said. Interest from Brazil is growing rapidly, he said, and new growth is emerging from China and India.

"Those are large, large countries with a very smart population that I think are going to like coming here," he said.

What they will see could remind them of attractions at Central Florida's

theme parks.

"There's definitely a trend in the museum industry over the past couple of decades to become more like theme parks," said Robert Niles, editor of the Theme Park Insider website.

"You see a lot of the same companies that contract with theme parks to develop attractions that are also contracting with museums to help them develop new exhibits that incorporate some of the same storytelling techniques that we see in [theme parks](#)," he said.

The Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex is operated by Delaware North Companies Parks & Resorts and receives no government funds. Its operation is supported by ticket, merchandise and food sales.

"Thank goodness, we didn't have to buy Atlantis . . . but we did have to pay all the other expenses," Moore said. Those included draining fuel from the orbiter and designing and constructing the building.

The \$100 million price tag "was a big number to us, to be honest, but it's a good number because it allows us to say, 'We're really going to change things here at the visitor complex,'" Moore said. "There are big guys out here doing some pretty cool things," he said. "But having a real space-flown artifact - and we have others as well - it really tells that whole manned space flight story."

Denise Likar and family dropped by the complex while on a six-hour layover between their Cape Canaveral-based cruise and a flight home to Orange County, Calif.

"I've been going through here going 'Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,'" she said. "I know that this feat of being able to pitch a vehicle this heavy is just awe-inspiring."

Robert Holt of Deltona, a self-described "[space](#) nut," said he was impressed by the size of the orbiter.

"You just don't know until you're this close to it," he said. "This will draw a lot of visitors."

Robert Shouse of Edgewater sat on the lower level, looking up the wing of Atlantis.

"I'm just in amazement about how far we've come and enjoying the sight of it."

Displaying a big-as-life piece of history can spur children to learn about science and technology, said JoAnn Newman, president of the Orlando Science Center.

"For so many of them, it's textbooks and it's boring and they're afraid of it," she said. "Just to be able to see . . . a real shuttle, to know where it's gone, where it's been . . . just to be able to get up close and personal, I think, with such an amazing piece of technology is inspiring."

M.J. Soileau, vice president for research and commercialization at the University of Central Florida, said he likes to think exhibits inspire kids.

"I was a kid when the Russians launched Sputnik, and that was a big deal in my life," he said.

"We hear all the time that kids - or any of us - don't learn much from just reading about stuff. We learn something different when you stand next to it."

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