

Moonshot pad roaring back into action with SpaceX launch

February 17 2017, by Marcia Dunn



In this Tuesday, Sept. 21, 2010 file photo, photographers prepare to make photos of the space shuttle Discovery at launch pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Dormant for nearly six years, Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center should see its first commercial flight in February 2017. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will use the pad to hoist supplies for the International Space Station. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

The launch pad used to send Americans to the moon and shuttle

astronauts into orbit is roaring back into action.

Dormant for nearly six years, NASA's Launch Complex 39A should see its first commercial flight this weekend. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will use it to hoist supplies to the International Space Station.

Saturday morning's planned launch will be SpaceX's first from Florida since a devastating rocket explosion at a neighboring pad last summer. The accident prompted SpaceX to whip 39A into shape sooner than anticipated under its lease with NASA. The pad wrecked in the Sept. 1 accident remains unusable.

A brief rundown on historic Launch Complex 39A at Kennedy Space Center:

BIG BEGINNINGS

NASA built 39A, as it's commonly known, in the mid-1960s for the monstrous Saturn V moon rockets. It was first used in 1967 for an unmanned test flight, followed by another early the next year. Next came the astronauts, with Apollo 8 soaring to the moon right before Christmas 1968. SpaceX chief Elon Musk noted late last week via Instagram, "We are honored to be allowed to use it."

SHOWSTOPPING ACTS

The crescendo came on July 16, 1969, as Apollo 11's Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins embarked on the first manned moon landing. All six Apollo moon-landings originated from here, as did close-

call Apollo 13. Columbia made the first space shuttle flight from this pad on April 12, 1981, while Atlantis closed out the program from the same spot on July 8, 2011.



In this July 26, 1971 photo provided by NASA, the Apollo 15 space vehicle as it lifts off from Launch Complex 39A at Kennedy Space Center in Fla. Dormant for nearly six years, Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center should see its first commercial flight on Feb. 18, 2017. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will use the pad to hoist supplies for the International Space Station. (NASA via AP)

FREQUENT FLIER

This will be the 95th rocket launch from 39A. It was the departure point for 82 space shuttle flights and 11 Apollo missions, as well as the unmanned 1973 launch of Skylab, NASA's original space station. One flight resulted in casualties. As Columbia lifted off on Jan. 16, 2003, foam insulation from the external fuel tank broke off and gouged the left wing. Columbia and its crew were lost 16 days later during re-entry.

SPACE X TAKEOVER



In this Dec. 21, 1968 file photo, the Saturn V Rocket with the Apollo 8 spacecraft lifts off from launch complex 39A at Cape Kennedy, Fla. The spacecraft is carrying astronauts Frank Borman, commander, James A. Lovell Jr., and William A. Anders to a seven-day mission scheduled to include 10 orbits of the moon. (AP Photo)

SpaceX signed a 20-year lease with NASA in 2014, beating out another tech billionaire's rocket company, Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin. Renovation work was accelerated after SpaceX's Sept. 1 rocket explosion a few miles away at Launch Complex 40 on Air Force property. The accident

occurred during fueling for a prelaunch test. It is from pad 39A that SpaceX plans to launch Falcon rockets with space station-bound astronauts for NASA as early as next year. The company also might send spacecraft and, ultimately, crews to Mars from this location as well.

LESSER-KNOWN TWIN

Just a mile to the north, Launch Complex 39B is the lesser-known, lesser-used twin. Apollo 10 christened 39B in 1969. In the shuttle era, Challenger inaugurated the pad on Jan. 28, 1986. The doomed flight with schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe lasted 73 seconds. In all, 53 shuttle missions began from this pad, for a total of 59 launches of all types. It was last used in 2009 for an unmanned test flight of NASA's Ares rocket, canceled soon afterward. NASA is transforming 39B for its yet-to-fly Space Launch System megarocket, intended to send astronauts beyond low-Earth orbit.



In this Monday Aug. 24, 2009 file photo, space shuttle Discovery is mounted on pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla., for a launch to deliver supplies and equipment to the International Space Station. Dormant for nearly six years, Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center should see its first commercial flight on Feb. 18, 2017. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will use the pad to hoist supplies for the International Space Station. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)



In this Friday, June 17, 2011 file photo, space shuttle Atlantis is mounted on Pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Dormant for nearly six years, Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center should see its first commercial flight on Feb. 18, 2017. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will use the pad to hoist supplies for the International Space Station. (AP Photo/John Raoux)



In this Saturday, Sept. 20, 2008 file photo, space shuttle Atlantis on pad 39A, left, and Endeavour on pad 39B stand ready in front of a rainbow in the early morning at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Dormant for nearly six years, Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center should see its first commercial flight on Feb. 18, 2017. A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will use the pad to hoist supplies for the International Space Station. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

More information: SpaceX: www.spacex.com/
 NASA: www.nasa.gov/

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