

# Astronauts inspect shuttle on way to space station

February 9 2010, By MARCIA DUNN , AP Aerospace Writer



Space Shuttle Endeavour lifts-off from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla. Monday, Feb. 8, 2010. Endeavour's six member crew will deliver a large room with a cupola to the International Space Station. (AP Photo/Terry Renna)

(AP) -- Endeavour's astronauts inspected their ship early Tuesday for any launch damage as they raced toward a 200-mile-high rendezvous with the International Space Station.

Barely a day after blasting into orbit, the space shuttle crew used a

100-foot, laser-tipped boom to check the thermal shielding on the wings and nose. A few pieces of [foam insulation](#) broke off the [external fuel tank](#) during Monday morning's launch, including a narrow 1-foot strip. But there was no indication anything hit the shuttle.

A foam strike brought down Columbia in 2003, and orbiting astronauts have carried out exhaustive inspections ever since. Commander George Zamka and his crew performed the routine survey to make sure the launch cameras did not miss something.

The long, laborious process got under way late Monday and stretched into Tuesday morning. The [astronauts](#) were in the home stretch - surveying Endeavour's left wing - when the screens suddenly went black. Mission Control worked with pilot Terry Virts to get everything back in order. The interruption lasted just a half-hour.

Flight director Kwatsi Alibaruho said nothing of concern was jumping out in the survey, but stressed that the data needed to be analyzed by experts.

[Endeavour](#) will catch up with the space station early Wednesday, performing a slow-motion pirouette for the cameras before docking. The close-up pictures of the shuttle's belly - impossible to see any other way in such detail - will provide even more information regarding Endeavour's health.

The shuttle is delivering a new room to the space station, as well as the biggest window ever launched, part of a fancy domed compartment. Together, the additions are worth more than \$400 million.

The five space station residents couldn't wait to see their six shuttle friends.

"Yeah! Endeavour is on our way!" Japanese astronaut Soichi Noguchi cheered in a Twitter update.

It's been nearly three months since the last shuttle visit. Five missions are on tap this year, then NASA plans to retire the three remaining shuttles.

The space station will be 98 percent complete once the new room, Tranquility, and seven-windowed dome are installed by Endeavour's crew. It will be the final major construction job at the station.

Tranquility eventually will house life-support and exercise equipment, and a toilet. The dome - resembling a big bay window - will provide unprecedented views of Earth, outer space and the space station itself. The round central window is 31 inches across; the six surrounding windows are smaller.

The European Space Agency provided the Tranquility and dome.

The first of three spacewalks to install those compartments is set for Thursday night.

NASA has been flying space shuttles for 29 years and building the space station for 11 years.

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