

Endeavour Launches Into Night, Set to Expand Space Station



Space shuttle Endeavour lifts off its launch pad at 2:28 a.m. EDT to start the STS-123 mission to the International Space Station. Credit: NASA/Jim Grossmann

Space shuttle Endeavour thundered into orbit early Tuesday morning carrying seven astronauts and Japan's dreams for a space-based laboratory at the International Space Station.

Space shuttle Endeavour brought an early sunrise to the East Coast Tuesday, launching from NASA's Kennedy Space Center at 2:28 a.m. EDT and beginning the STS-123 mission to the International Space Station.

"This is a great launch and a real tribute to the team to get it ready to go fly," said Bill Gerstenmaier, NASA's associate administrator for Space Operations.

During the 16-day flight, Endeavour's seven astronauts will work with the three-member space station crew and ground teams around the world to install the first section of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency's Kibo laboratory and the Canadian Space Agency's two-armed robotic system, known as Dextre. STS-123 is the longest shuttle mission to the station and will include a record five shuttle spacewalks at the orbiting laboratory, delivery of a new crew member to the complex and the return of another astronaut after nearly seven weeks aboard the station.

Shortly before launch, Commander Gorie thanked the teams that helped make the launch possible. "You've got seven smiling faces on board here," said Gorie. "God's truly blessed us with a beautiful night to launch so let's light 'em up and give them a show."

Joining Gorie on STS-123 are Pilot Gregory H. Johnson and Mission Specialists Robert L. Behnken, Mike Foreman, Rick Linnehan, Garrett Reisman and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency astronaut Takao Doi. Reisman will replace current station crew member Léopold Eyharts, who has lived on the outpost since early February. Reisman will return to Earth on shuttle Discovery's STS-124 mission, targeted for launch on May 25, 2008.

Endeavour's cargo will help continue the station's assembly. The Japanese Experiment Logistics Module-Pressurized Section, or ELM-PS, will hold experiment samples, maintenance tools and other spare items. Dextre can be attached to the station's robotic arm to handle smaller components typically requiring a spacewalking astronaut. At the tip of each arm is a "hand" that consists of retractable jaws used to grip objects.

Source: NASA

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