

Russia's Parting Gift to NASA: a Photo

May 23, 2011



A view from the International Space Station of the docked shuttle Endeavour on Thursday. The landmass is Italy.

Half the International Space Station crew was to depart for Earth early Tuesday, leaving behind the visiting shuttle Endeavour and a parting gift for NASA — a legacy photograph of the shuttle parked at the orbital outpost.

As the 30-year-old shuttle program winds down, NASA has been looking for an opportunity to capture an iconic image of one of its orbiters on the job at the space station. The United States will have devoted 37 of its 135 space shuttle flights to construction and support of the space station by the time the program ends after one last cargo run in July.

"Hopefully those pictures will show up in textbooks for years to come," said Kenneth Todd, a space station manager. "It would be great to have the space shuttle represented there with us, as well as all the other international partners."

The only way to get the shot is from aboard a Russian Soyuz capsule, the vehicles used to transport station crews to and from the outpost.

NASA pitched the idea of a Soyuz photo shoot to its Russian partners earlier this year, but it was scrapped for technical reasons. However, a two-week launch delay for shuttle Endeavour to repair an electrical problem presented another opportunity: Its 12-day visit coincided with the scheduled departure of outgoing station commander Dmitry Kondratyev, Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli and NASA astronaut Catherine "Cady" Coleman.

The trio was to climb into one of the station's two Soyuz capsules to return to Earth early Tuesday, ending their six-month stay in space.

After departing the outpost at 1:35 a.m. Moscow time, Kondratyev was to fly his Soyuz spaceship out to about 200 meters from the station, which was then to slowly rotate about 130 degrees while Nespoli snapped pictures and shot video.

It would be the first time a shuttle and the space station have appeared together from a remote vantage point, with a planetary view of Earth in the background.

NASA will have one last opportunity to get the shot if for some reason Tuesday's attempt fails. Shuttle Atlantis is due to arrive at the station in July for NASA's final shuttle mission. There is no station crew rotation planned for that time, so any photo shoot would require the Soyuz to leave and then repark at the station, a more complicated operation that has yet to be approved.

Kondratyev and his crew, along with the prized pictures, were scheduled to land at 6:26 a.m. in Kazakhstan. NASA hopes to copy and distribute the digital images within a day or two.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/05/23/russias-parting-gift-to-nasa-a-photo-a7130>