

NASA Releases Unique Shots of Space Station and Shuttle

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This May 23, 2011 photo taken by Expedition 27 crew member Paolo Nespoli from the Soyuz TMA-20 following its undocking and released by NASA shows the International Space Station and the docked space s **Paolo Nespoli**

WASHINGTON — NASA has released unprecedented close-up glamour photos of a space shuttle linked to the International Space Station taken from a departing Russian spaceship.

Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli took the photos two weeks ago from inside a Soyuz capsule soon after he left the space station for the trip back to Earth. The space station and attached shuttle Endeavour rotated for the photo shoot while the capsule hovered 320 kilometers above Earth on May 24.

Soyuz commander Dmitry Kondratyev asked Nespoli, who had the best view in the Soyuz upper portion, "Is it beautiful?"

"It's nice, very, very nice," Nespoli responded.

Nespoli took the pictures from about 200 meters away.

The Soyuz did not have the ability to send the high-quality pictures back to Earth live. When the Soyuz landed in Kazakhstan later that evening, the photos were shipped to NASA.

Nespoli, as planned, left the cameras in part of the Soyuz that burns up in space, but he made sure that the digital photo cards returned to Earth with him. And if he didn't do it himself, mission controllers reminded him a couple times.

This was such a one-of-a-kind event that even though Endeavour's crew was supposed to be asleep, they were allowed to wake a couple of hours earlier if they wanted to watch the orbital ballet.

A Soyuz capsule had never headed for home while a shuttle was parked at the space station, providing the rare opportunity for the photo session. The Endeavour was on its next-to-last shuttle mission.

The shuttle fleet is retiring after one last flight next month with a load of supplies for the station.

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