

## Discovery lifts off for space station

*Updated 7 hours 32 minutes ago*

**Space shuttle Discovery with seven astronauts aboard has blasted off on one of NASA's final servicing missions to the International Space Station, about 355 kilometres above Earth.**

With a brilliant flash of light and a thundering roar, the shuttle lifted off at 6:21am Monday (local time), shattering the pre-dawn calm around the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

"Enjoy the ride," shuttle test director Laurie Sally radioed the crew minutes before lift-off.

The shuttle is carrying an Italian-built cargo hauler filled with equipment, experiments, food and supplies for the space station, construction on which is expected to be finished in September after 12 years.

The United States plans to stop flying its trio of space shuttles after three more missions, which will stock the outpost with spare parts and gear too big or bulky to fit on other spaceships.

The shuttles, which can carry about 50 tonnes to the station's orbit, are being retired due to cost and safety concerns.

NASA will then turn over cargo deliveries to two commercial firms: privately held Space Exploration Technologies of California and Orbital Sciences Corp of Virginia.

Station partners Russia, Europe and Japan also have vessels that can haul cargo to the outpost.

Crew transport is already handled exclusively by Russia, which flies its three-person Soyuz capsules at a cost of \$US51 million per seat.

The Obama administration is proposing to boost NASA's budget by \$US6 billion over five years to seed development of commercial space taxis in the United States.

Space Exploration Technologies, or SpaceX, plans to debut its Falcon 9 rocket next month on a demonstration mission.

Founder and chief executive Elon Musk, a multimillionaire internet entrepreneur, says it will take about three years to develop a launch escape system so that SpaceX's Dragon capsule can carry people.

Other firms, including Boeing and United Launch Alliance, a joint venture of Lockheed Martin and Boeing, are working on space taxi development under NASA grants.

- Reuters

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*The Discovery is carrying an Italian-built cargo hauler filled with equipment, experiments, food and supplies for the International Space Station. (Reuters: Scott Audette)*

- [Video: Discovery blasts off \(ABC News\)](#)
- [Video: Discovery heads to final frontier \(ABC News Breakfast\)](#)

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