

At Florida's Kennedy Space Center, it's all about rocket science



• Space Shuttle Atlantis shows wear and tear from flying 33 missions. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

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Soon after I walked in, the room went dark save for a soothing video playing on an oversized floor-to-ceiling screen. The pastoral scene portrayed a wildlife refuge, presumably one at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex here on Florida's Atlantic Coast.

The scene soon shifted from wetlands and alligators to scientists, astronauts, rockets and launchpads as a compelling story of the development of the Space Shuttle unfolded. Once the video ended, the screen turned transparent and slowly opened for a big reveal. I won't spoil the surprise but can tell you I saw a few tears and heard exclamations of "Wow" as well as an expletive inappropriate for a family newspaper.

The Space Shuttle Atlantis attraction was just one of the high points of my day at the Kennedy Space Center that included a look at NASA's biggest rocket and a "Behind the Gates" bus tour passing active launchpads.



The figure of a space shuttle astronaut is suspended inside the Space Shuttle Atlantis attraction at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. - **Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier**

Achievements and tragedies

The Space Center is named for President John F. Kennedy whose "We Choose to Go to the Moon" speech in 1962 stirred up support for the Apollo space program. Americans choose to take up challenges such as space exploration "not because they are easy, but because they are hard," he said.

Attractions and exhibits show visitors just how challenging and just how hard.

The Forever Remembered gallery in the Space Shuttle Atlantis attraction memorializes 14 astronauts who died during Space Shuttle Challenger and Columbia missions. Personal items of each astronaut are displayed in glass cases. The American flag emblem on Challenger's fuselage and the framing of the cockpit windows on Columbia are among the pieces of recovered hardware in the exhibit.

When I drew close to the Space Shuttle Atlantis -- not a model, the real thing -- I saw scratches and patches, the wear and tear from flying 33 missions between 1985 and 2011. Atlantis contributed to the success of the International Space Station and Hubble Space Telescope. The shuttle is displayed as it would have appeared just undocked from the space station, rotated and with its payload doors open and robotic arm extended. Bi-level viewing platforms allowed me to check it out from several angles.

I pretended to dock at the space station and land the orbiter back on earth using shuttle simulators and strapped into the Shuttle Launch Experience for a bouncy mock liftoff.

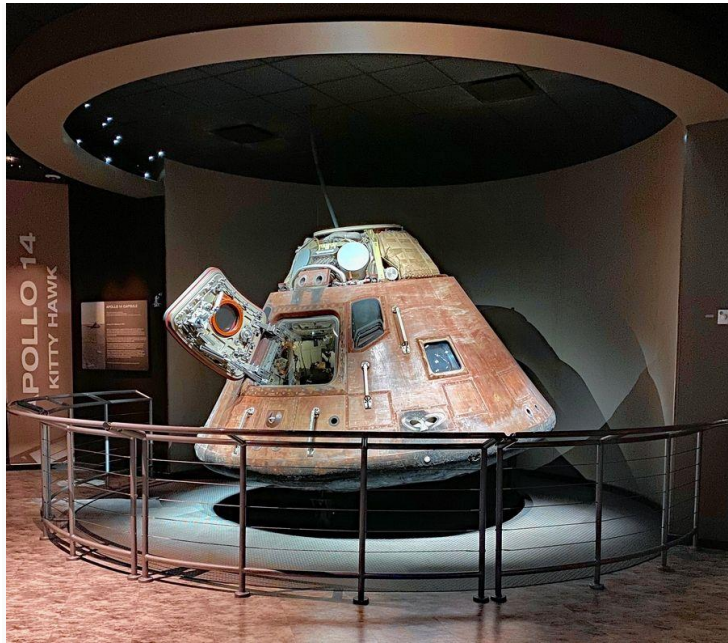


The tallest rocket ever built hangs inside the Apollo/Saturn V Center. - **Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier**

Counting down

Real launches happen just outside the visitor complex. Bus tours are the only way a civilian can to go behind the security gates. My tour began with a drive through the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge where I spotted bald eagle nests and kept my eyes peeled for turtles and alligators hiding in the wetlands. Gators and other wildlife that have crawled too close to the launchpads are removed by the National Park Service before blastoff.

We made a brief stop at the massive Vehicle Assembly Building where rockets and space components are stacked onto a mobile launcher. The Statue of Liberty, holding a rocket in her hand, could fit inside the building's gaping doors. A creepy-looking vehicle that could have come from a "Star Wars" movie set sat parked outside. This crawler-transporter travels at a snail's pace to move spacecraft from the assembly building to the launchpad on broad battle tank-like tracks.



A space capsule recovered from an Apollo mission occupies an exhibit area inside the Kennedy Space Center's Apollo/Saturn V Center. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Sadly, no spacecraft sat on the launchpads during my tour, but I could imagine how they appear when in use by NASA and SpaceX. Lightning towers stand around each pad to draw strikes away from spacecraft. Storm-spawning heat and humidity make Florida the lightning capital of the U.S. Despite this drawback, otherwise favorable weather makes launches possible year-round and an oceanfront location means rockets can launch over water. More than 100,000 workers are employed in aerospace in this part of Florida.

Racing to the moon

The bus tour not only gives visitors access to launch sites, buildings and equipment, it's the only way to visit the Apollo/Saturn V Center. The thrill of a countdown is captured in a walk through a launch control room with actual consoles used in Apollo missions. I stopped dead in my tracks when I entered the main room dominated by Saturn V, the largest rocket ever flown. This 363-foot behemoth shot Apollo astronauts into space for lunar missions, including the 1969 moon landing. A real Lunar Module spreads below Saturn V in a mock-up of the landing and the nearby Apollo Treasures Gallery displays an authentic Apollo spacecraft and a pair of once-white space boots dirtied by moon dust.



A rocket garden stands just inside the entrance to the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex on the Atlantic Coast of Florida. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

My biggest regret: Not budgeting a full day -- or better, two -- to explore the space center. By the time I rode the bus back to the visitor complex, it was nearly closing time. I'll have to come back to watch a show in the IMAX theater, meet an astronaut and tour the Heroes and Legends building containing the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame. I might also reserve an extra-cost experience such as Chat with an Astronaut, the Astronaut Training Experience or a Cape Canaveral Space Force Station tour to see where America's space program began.

With luck and the right timing, I might witness a rocket launch from one of the Kennedy Space Center official viewing areas or one of the beaches or parks along the Space Coast. Launches often are delayed by weather and technical difficulties, so booking lodging on the Space Coast rather than in Orlando, 45 minutes away, is advisable.

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If you go

Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex: Merritt Island, Florida; one day admission \$75, \$65 kids 3-11, \$70 ages 55 and up; two days \$89, \$79, \$84; [kennedyspacecenter.com/](https://www.kennedyspacecenter.com/)

Florida's Space Coast Office of Tourism: For launch viewing sites and lodging, [visitspacecoast.com/](https://www.visitspacecoast.com/)

Visit Florida: [visitflorida.com/](https://www.visitflorida.com/)

- Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by Visit Florida and the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex.

<https://www.dailyherald.com/entlife/20221029/at-floridas-kennedy-space-center-its-all-about-rocket-science>