

[TRAVEL](#)

Exploring outer space in Florida

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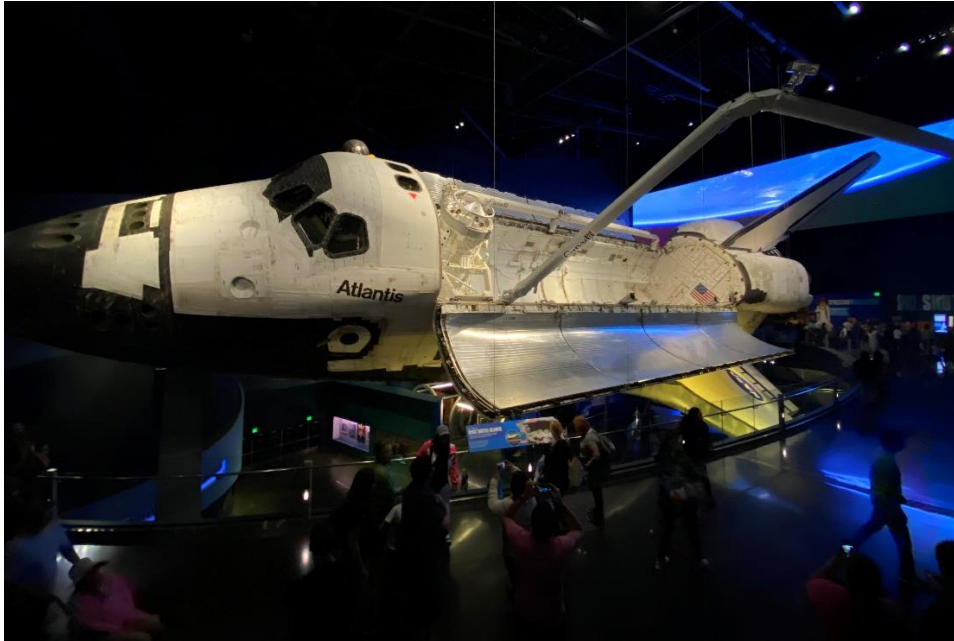
A rocket garden greets visitors inside the entrance of the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. The ULA Delta II recently was added to the collection.

Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier Special to the Post-Dispatch

MERRIT ISLAND, FLA. • The room grew dark soon after I walked in, save for the calming video playing on an oversized floor-to-ceiling screen. The pastoral scene depicted a wildlife refuge, presumably the one at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex here on the Atlantic coast of Florida.

Soon the video shifted from wetlands and alligators to one of scientists and astronauts, rockets and launch pads as a riveting story of the development of the space shuttle unfolded. The video faded, and the screen turned translucent. I won't be a spoiler and give away the big reveal, but I dare anyone who experiences it not to tear up, exclaim "Wow," or an expletive inappropriate in a family newspaper.



Space Shuttle Atlantis flew 33 missions before she was retired and moved to the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

The space shuttle Atlantis attraction was just one of the high points of my all-too-short day at the visitor complex last year just before it closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Atlantis and many other attractions have reopened but some restrictions remain: face coverings required, temperature screening, social distancing and limited attendance.

To the moon and back

The space center takes its name from President John F. Kennedy whose patriotic "We choose to go to the moon" speech in 1962 helped persuade the public to support the Apollo space program. Americans, he insisted, choose to take up challenges such as space exploration "not because they are easy, but because they are hard."

The center's attractions and exhibits demonstrate just how challenging and just how hard.



Moon dust dirties an astronaut's boots on display at the Kennedy Space Center.
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Among the 60 exhibits at the Atlantis attraction, the Forever Remembered gallery memorializes the 14 astronauts who died during Challenger and Columbia missions. Glass cases contain personal items of each astronaut. Among the recovered hardware was the American flag emblem on Challenger's fuselage and the framing of the cockpit windows on Columbia. Sobering, indeed.

When I first laid eyes on Atlantis — the REAL Atlantis — I noticed its scratches and patches, wear and tear from flying 33 missions between 1985 and 2011. It was instrumental in the success of the Hubble space telescope and the International Space Station. In fact, it is displayed as it would have appeared just undocked from the space station, slightly rotated with its payload doors open and robotic arm extended. Bilevel viewing platforms gave me the chance to view it inside and out from several angles.

The kid in me loved playing with shuttle simulators, pretending to dock at the space station and land the orbiter back on Earth. During the somewhat silly Shuttle Launch Experience, I strapped into a seat that bounced and shook as a scene on a screen sent me into space.

Five, four, three, two ...

I got a feel for what it takes to pull off a real launch at the Apollo/Saturn V Center where a walk through a launch control room, with actual consoles used in Apollo missions, captured the thrill of a countdown.



The tallest rocket ever built hangs over exhibits inside the Apollo/Saturn V Center.
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My jaw dropped when I entered the main room dominated by Saturn V. Standing beneath the largest rocket ever flown gave me goosebumps. The 363-foot monster sent all astronauts on Apollo lunar missions into space, including that memorable Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969. A mockup of the landing, with a real Lunar Module, spreads below Saturn V. In the adjacent Apollo Treasures Gallery, I walked around a real Apollo spacecraft and peered at a dirty pair of space boots. Was that moondust on them? It was.

Visitors board a bus from the main complex to reach the Apollo/Saturn V Center. Drivers disinfect buses before each trip and seat passengers in a socially distanced manner. When pandemic restrictions ease, visitors may once again be able to take the expanded bus tour I enjoyed to the launch pads, the only way for civilians to go beyond the security gates.



A space shuttle stack of two solid rocket boosters and orange external tank stand outside the entrance to the space shuttle Atlantis attraction at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex in Florida. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

That 45-minute tour, when it resumes, travels through the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge on the grounds of the space center. Guides point out some of the 17 bald eagle nests where as many as 30 eagles hatch a year and keep a lookout for turtles and alligators prowling the wetlands. Prior to every launch, National Park Service employees remove gators and other wildlife that have crawled onto the launch pads.

My tour paused outside the massive Vehicle Assembly Building where rockets and space vehicles become stacked vertically onto a mobile launcher. Its doors are tall enough for the Statue of Liberty to slide inside even while holding a rocket in her hand. The crawler-transporter, a creepy-looking vehicle right out of “Star Wars,” often is parked outside. On broad battle tank-like tracks, it moves spacecraft from the assembly building to the launch pad. My guide joked about its mileage rating: 32 feet per gallon of diesel fuel.



The massive Vehicle Assembly Building is where spacecraft are prepared for a launch at the Kennedy Space Center. Credit: Katherine Rodeghier

There were no spacecraft near the launch pads during my tour, so I had to imagine how they look when NASA and SpaceX put them to use. I took note of the lightning towers positioned around each pad to draw strikes away from spacecraft. Florida ranks as the lightning capital of the U.S., thanks to heat and humidity that spawn storms. Even so, this site was chosen for space exploration because favorable weather makes launches possible year-round and its position on the Atlantic Coast means rockets can launch over water. Aerospace is big business here, employing more than 100,000 workers.

Post-pandemic plan

Sadly, by the time I returned to the main visitor complex, it was nearly closing time. I had to skip the IMAX theater and the Heroes and Legends building containing the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame. I also cut short my visit to the Rocket Garden showcasing actual rockets of the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space programs. Since my visit, the ULA Delta II rocket, one of the newest pieces in space exploration, has made the garden its permanent home. Delta II fostered the Global Positioning System and galvanized the exploration of Mars.



Kennedy Space Center's Heroes and Legends exhibit tells the story of the men and women in the Astronaut Hall of Fame.

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I hope to see it when I return to Kennedy Space Center after the pandemic is over to take in some attractions it put on hiatus. I might attend an astronaut autograph signing and reserve at least one of the center's enhanced experiences, maybe Dine with an Astronaut or Astronaut Training

Experience, or I'll book one of the special interest tours giving access to the restricted and historic areas of Cape Canaveral Air Force Station where America's space program began.

And if I time my trip right, I'll witness a rocket launch from one of the Kennedy Space Center's official viewing areas or one of the beaches or parks along the Space Coast.

Launches often are delayed by weather — that lightning — so booking lodging on the Space Coast rather than in Orlando, 45 minutes away, will give me flexibility. I may return to the condos at Cape Crossing Resort & Marina on Merritt Island close to the space center. If a launch is scrubbed, I can rent a boat from its marina and explore the Space Coast's inland waterways until the countdown resumes.

IF YOU GO

Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex: Space Commerce Way, Merritt Island, Florida, 1-877-313-2610, kennedyspacecenter.com, \$57 plus tax, \$47 plus tax ages 3-11.

Florida's Space Coast Office of Tourism: For launch-viewing sites and lodging, 1-877-572-3224, visitspacecoast.com

Visit Florida: 1-888-735-2872, visitflorida.com

Cape Crossing Resort & Marina: 1-800-727-6845, capecrossing.com

https://www.stltoday.com/travel/exploring-outer-space-in-florida/article_1c14a212-15e8-5c1b-8203-a63619e3b828.html