



U.S. human spaceflight and the road ahead

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By **Traci Watson**, Special for USA TODAY

What's been done



By Stan Honda, AFP/Getty Images
The space shuttle Discovery sits on Pad 39A at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida in November of last year. The shuttle is scheduled to launch February 24.

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The USA first lofted a human into space in 1961. Within only a dozen years of that ride around the Earth by astronaut **Alan Shepard**, NASA landed 12 men on the moon and launched the Skylab space station.

The space shuttle era began in 1981, when shuttle Columbia launched from **Cape Canaveral**. Since then, the shuttle has lifted off 132 times, returning safely to Earth on all

but two missions: Challenger's launch on Jan. 28, 1986, and Columbia's return flight on Feb. 1, 2003.

CHALLENGER:How the disaster brought NASA down to Earth

Among the shuttle's achievements are construction of the 414-ton International Space Station, now circling Earth with a crew of six, and the launching and repair of the **Hubble Space Telescope**.

More than 300 people have flown on the shuttle, according to unofficial tallies by space buffs.

What's next

Three more shuttle missions are planned, one each for the remaining shuttles.

Challenger Profiles

Spouses of two crewmembers reflect on the tragedy:

Steven McAuliffe The widower of Christa McAuliffe says in a statement that remembrances are "comforting and inspirational" to his family.

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June Scobee Rodgers The widow of shuttle commander Francis "Dick" Scobee says she thinks her husband "would be disappointed that some of the lessons of the tragedy were

forgotten."Discovery is due to launch Feb. 24 and go to the space station with a load of supplies and a storage cubicle. Endeavour is to launch April 19 and also go to the space station. It will carry more supplies and a multimillion-dollar physics experiment, the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer.

NASA has a final flight set for June 28. Shuttle Atlantis will take supplies to the space station and return a faulty pump. But NASA does not have funding yet for the few hundred million dollars to pay for the mission.

The mission scheduled for April was to be commanded by astronaut Mark Kelly. But Kelly's wife, Rep. [Gabrielle Giffords](#), D-Ariz., was critically wounded in a shooting this month, and it's not clear whether Kelly will fly his mission with her in rehabilitation.

The future

After the shuttle is retired, U.S. astronauts will ride to orbit on Russia's Soyuz spaceship, which launches in Kazakhstan.

Under NASA's agreements with the Russians, the Soyuz will give a lift to three astronauts in 2011, six in 2012 and six more in 2013.

In the long term, NASA is pinning its hopes on private companies. One, [SpaceX](#), has sent a test spaceship into orbit — without a crew — and returned it safely to Earth.

Five other companies have gotten funding

from NASA to develop spaceships or other components of a system to launch astronauts into orbit.

None of these commercial ships is likely to be ready before 2016, according to an independent panel commissioned by President Obama.

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