New crew reaches International Space Station

(Reuters) - A fresh three-member crew arrived at the International Space Station on Tuesday, bolstering the two-man skeleton crew that has been keeping the outpost operational since December 1.

A Russian Soyuz capsule carrying cosmonaut Oleg Kotov, Japanese astronaut Soichi Noguchi and NASA rookie flier Timothy Creamer coasted into its berthing port at 5:48 p.m. EST (2248 GMT), as the station sailed 220 miles above Rio de Janeiro. The men were launched into space on Monday from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

The trio is expected to remain aboard the station until May.

"This is a really nice way to top off the year," said NASA's chief astronaut Peggy Whitson. "Currently onboard we only have two crew members, so I know they're looking forward to having company."

Welcoming the new crew was station commander Jeff Williams and flight engineer Maxim Suraev, both of whom have been in orbit since September 30.

NASA no longer flies station crew members on the shuttle. The agency is devoting its final five shuttle missions to station assembly and construction, and expects to retire its three-ship shuttle fleet in less than a year.

The agency is working on developing a capsule-style replacement ship called Orion, but it is not expected to be ready to fly until 2015 at the earliest. That leaves Russian Soyuz vehicles as the sole transportation system for astronauts and cosmonauts, though several commercial companies are vying for NASA funds to develop space taxis as well.

NASA pays Russia about $50 million per seat for Soyuz flights.

Kotov, Noguchi and Creamer will oversee the final assembly stage of the $100 billion space station, a project of 16 nations that has been under construction in orbit for more than a decade.

"This increment really sets the stage for the last year of the shuttle program," said Kirk Shireman, NASA's deputy station program manger. "It's a big growth year for the International Space Station."

NASA's last major station component -- a connecting node that will serve as a second living quarters for the crew -- is due to arrive in February, along with an Italian-built cupola that features seven windows.

Subsequent missions will deliver a small Russian research module, an international particle physics experiment called the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer, and tons of spare parts and supplies.

"We're going to finish strong with the shuttle and make sure we leave station in the best possible posture," said NASA's spaceflight chief, Bill Gerstenmaier.

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