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Image of the Columbus module while being loaded in the cargo bay of Atlantis space shuttle NASA

Columbus Back on Track

Atlantis will launch on 7 February

No more delays, says NASA! The space shuttle Atlantis will liftoff on Thursday 7 February from the Kennedy Space Center at 20:24 CET, and will dock to the International Space Station two days later, on 9 February at 18:23 CET. Atlantis is scheduled to return back to Earth of February the 18th, somewhere around 15:57 CET. Once flown to the ISS, Europe will finally become an active partner in the operation of the only space station currently in Earth's orbit. The Columbus laboratory represents ESA's most important mission to the ISS and a key contribution to the build of the station. Originally set to launch on 6 December 2007, the transportation of the European space laboratory was delayed due to several problems with the space shuttle's sensor gauges, which controls the shutdown of the engines while running on an empty fuel tank. Columbus has been loaded into the cargo bay of the space shuttle along with two of its external experiments, which will be mounted on its sides once the module is docked to the ISS. Also flying with the space shuttle Atlantis will be German astronaut Hans Schlegel, who will participate in two of the three scheduled spacewalks to secure the module to the ISS. Schlegel will have the role of finalizing the installation of the power systems to the European lab. The second European astronaut is Leopold Eyharts, who will take part in the activation of Columbus and its experiments, once in the orbit. After the completion of the installation and the activation phase, the ESA's Columbus Control Center will take over the role of monitoring the space module. Let's just hope that Atlantis will not experience any other technical difficulties. The Columbus program has been commissioned by the ESA in 1985, and involves a cylindrical laboratory module with two end cones, about 4.5 meters in diameter and almost 7 meters long, extremely similar to the Multi-Purpose Logistics Modules that are specially designed to fit into the cargo bay of the space shuttles. It contains a series of scientific equipments, such as the Fluid Science Laboratory, Biolab, Solar Monitoring Observatory and others. Agreements between the two space agencies state that 51 percent of the usage of the laboratory will be designated to ESA while the remaining is allocated to NASA.