

## First Astronaut: Brazil Welcomed at the Exclusive Space Club

Contributed by Newsroom  
Thursday, 30 March 2006

Brazil's first astronaut blasted off from earth on a cloudless day today with a Russia-US crew bound for the orbiting International Space Station.

Marcos Pontes (43), a Brazilian Air Force pilot, was hunched inside the spacecraft with Russian cosmonaut Pavel Vinogradov and US astronaut Jeffrey Williams, both of whom were starting a six-month rotation in space. Onboard cameras showed Pontes, who had a window seat, giving a thumbs-up.

Pontes, who packed a Brazilian flag and football team shirt, returns to earth in 10 days with the outgoing crew, American Bill McArthur and Russian Valery Tokarev.

Pontes had said on Wednesday that he was taking the flag and jersey in the hope it would bring his nation's team victory in the forthcoming World Cup.

A leading Brazilian TV channel that broadcast the footage of the launch in Latin America, said it marked Brazil's entrance in the elite club of space powers.

Russian experts are currently helping Brazil build a space center in Alcântara, on Brazil's Atlantic coast, while the country is planning to design its own carrier rocket based on Russian space technologies to launch satellites into orbit.

The mission, which is costing Brazil about US\$ 10 million, comes less than three years after Brazil's space program met with disaster when a rocket exploded on the launch pad.

The explosion of the first Brazilian rocket built to take satellites killed 21 people at the site in the north of the country.

The program of the new ISS mission includes a plasma crystal experiment, and technological, medical, and biological experiments. Astronauts will also make one space walk under the Russian program and two under the American one.

However, the new ISS crew will make something of a departure from the customary agenda of technical work and scientific experiment by indulging in a spot of golf, bringing back memories of Alan Shepherd's shots on the Moon in the early 1970s.

"This will be an attempt to tee off a ball into open space using an ordinary club," Pavel Vinogradov told journalists in the run-up to the launch. "I have never played golf myself, but have practiced with Jeffrey a couple of times."

Mercopress - [www.mercopress.com](http://www.mercopress.com)