

Space Exploration

For centuries people have been fascinated by space and dreamed about space flights. The ancient astronomers observed the planets and named them after Roman deities, such as Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Venus or Saturn. A remarkable step in understanding the Solar System was the helio-centric theory announced by Nicolaus Copernicus in the 16th century. In the 17th century, the telescope was invented and many startling discoveries were made. But only the years since the 1950`s can be described as a „golden age” in the exploration of the Solar System. In the second half of 20th century, scientists developed rockets which were powerful enough to overcome the force of gravity and travel to the Moon and the other stars and planets.

The history of modern space exploration is mainly the history of competition between the Russians and Americans. The most remarkable achievements started in 1957 when the Soviet Union sent a satellite named „Sputnik” into space. In the same year, „Sputnik 2” carrying the dog Laika was launched. Laika was the first living creature which survived weightlessness. In 1958 the first U.S. Satellite called „Explorer 1” went into orbit. In 1961 Soviet cosmonaut Yuri A. Gagarin became the first man in space aboard the spacecraft „Vostock 1”. He orbited the Earth once. In the same year, Alan Shepard was the first American astronaut to fly into space. Another important event was the first space walk undertaken by cosmonaut Alexei Lenov in 1965. „Landing a man on the Moon and returnig him safely to Earth” was a national goal set by President John F. Kennedy. In 1969, astronauts Neil Armsrtong and Edwin Aldrin took their „giant leap for mankind” as they laned on the Moon and made the first moonwalk. Since then several expeditions have probed the Moon.

The next significant stage in space research was the building of a re-usable shuttle for civilian and military missions. The first one, „Columbia”, was launched in 1981.

Nowadays, there are hundreds of commnications, navigational and astronomical satellites in space which make it possible to carry TV programmes, take photographs of the surface of the Earth, find new stars and discover previously unknown objects. This on-going research is carried out by astronauts in space stations such as the American „Skylab”. Automated machines have orbited and landed on Venus and Mars, probed the Sun`s environment, observed comets and asteroids and made surveys of Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. It seems that space research represents a special branch of modern technology and science where progress is continuing apace.

Speaking:

1. Are you interested in astronomy ? Why ? Why not ?
2. What event is regarded as the breakthrough in understanding the Solar System ?
3. What was the most remarkable achievemets of modern space exploration ?
4. Why was landing a man on the Moon hailed as „a giant leap for mankind” ? Explain.
5. Do you think that there is life on other planets? Why ? Why not ?
6. Do you belive in UFO`s ? Why ? Why not ?