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## Houston, is there a problem?

**Monday, October 22, 2007**

Dennis REDMONT

Houston, Texas - They say the devil is in the details... So here are a few questions from Houston, the space and energy capital of the United States, in the state of the Texas, home of the Bush Republican dynasty: 1. Will the astronauts on the International Space Station next week eat the first full scale Italian dinner, served by a handsome grey-haired Milan man who patrolled Beirut as a sergeant major 23 years ago and is now about to blast off? 2. Meanwhile, why should we follow the money to discover the next Republican candidate for the U.S. presidency in 2008? The answers to these apparently unrelated questions show how much privatization and globalization have deeply changed space exploration and politics.

Take Paolo Nespoli, the 50-year-old Italian astronaut who has been waiting nine long years to enter the International Space Station. His childhood dream was stoked on the streets of Beirut when the ambitious Italian journalist Orianna Fallaci told this young paratrooper: "You have to decide what you want to do when you grow up...if you want to do something, even be an astronaut, you have to try it." At 11:38 on Oct 23, with his orange space coveralls, his helmet and hopefully the Italian specially prepared meal, Nespoli will shoot off on the shuttle for Esperia mission STS 120, the first mission headed by two female astronauts, and a key trip to expand the station with an Italian-built module called HARMONY.

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Unbeknownst to many people, the International Space Station (ISS), a working laboratory orbiting 390 kilometers above the earth, and visible to the naked eye, now includes five space agencies representing 16 nations. Once completed, the new 100 billion dollar research outpost will sport contributions from the U.S., Canada, Japan, Russia, Brazil, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Italy. Assembly began in

1998 with the Russian-built Zarya module and every trip has added features. [Harmony](#), a habitat module built in Turin by Thales Alenia Space (of the Finmeccanica Group, also active in Turkey in field of aerospace) will now resume construction of the ISS with six ports to plug in new modules project had been suspended since 2003 after the traumatic disaster of the Columbia shuttle. One section is attached to the station, Harmony will serve as a passageway between the six-year-old made science module and new European and Japanese labs. Harmony also includes sleeping quarters for additional resident astronauts. Currently the station can accommodate three people.

The group will grow to six in two years. Discovery's arrival will set another precedent. Its crew of seven astronauts will be led by Pam Melroy, a two-time pilot astronaut and only the second woman assigned to command a shuttle. For the first time the shuttle and the station will be under the supervision of women astronauts. Discovery will be followed in early December by Atlantis, with three astronauts, to install the European Space Agency's Columbus module. And after that, it will be reinforced by unmanned vessels hauling heavy cargo capsules (Automatic Transfer Vehicles) from French Guiana, loaded up and sent off like parcels. Next it will receive Kibo, the Japanese Science module, and a Canadian-built robotic hand called Dextre, allowing for external repairs and reducing number of spacewalks. Watching over the transformation will be American astronaut Peggy Wilscam who will stay six months aboard the station, hosting two dozen astronauts from six countries. So the next seven months, the orbital outpost, now staffed by three member crews from the U.S. and Russia, will nearly double in size. As Nespoli concentrates on the scientific issues, he has not lost sight of the Italian space meal.

The problem is that NASA specifications still need to be fulfilled before the Italy-based food company (whose name remains secret), making a space version of "brasato" beef stew in a bag and other Italian delicacies (but no pasta al dente, and nothing that needs a refrigerator) make it across the Atlantic in time for the launch. Not only meals will be tested in space. Plants and other living organisms can also be studied. The International Space Station provides the first laboratory complex where gravity is virtually eliminated for extended periods. Research projects can allow purer protein crystals to be grown in space and scientists may be able to develop medicines that target particular disease-causing proteins. Such crystals, previously grown on many space shuttle missions, have shown promise in research for cancer, [diabetes](#), emphysema and immune disorders, possibly also for influenza and post-surgery inflammation. Nespoli hopes the food will get here, fast. This from a man with drive and patience. As a child he dreamed of shooting to the stars, but was drafted into the army in 1977, became a special forces operator, and the closest he got was a parachute dive. When writer Oriana Fallaci met him on a reporting mission, which led to her best-seller "Inshallah", she egged him on, goaded him, cajoled him and then portrayed him in her book as Angelo, one of the heroes of the Italian military mission which tried to help pacify Beirut after the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks that killed 241 American marines and 56 French paratroopers. Fallaci's question to Nespoli to go back to university and graduate, then leave the army, work as a design engineer in [Florence](#), and join the European astronaut Center in Cologne, Germany. He coordinated an Astro

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training database, before coordinating the support team for a computer used on the Russian space station Mir. In 1998, he was selected as an astronaut by the Italian Space Agency, and relocated Houston. On the way he met his Russian born wife Sonia (the daughter of a cosmonaut instructor when he visited "the City of the Stars" near [Moscow](#)).

This never could have happened during the Cold War. Then came the interminable wait, nine years due to delays after the Columbia disaster. On the other hand, Nespoli's firm hand in the key mission with the key module may catapult him to fame in his 14 day stay. Scientific American magazine describes the next shuttle launch as "the most dangerous to go from point B." Seeing sunset and sunrise every 20 minutes as he orbits the earth, the delicate maneuvers will make or break the progress of the next seven missions. Nespoli does not even wish to think of failure. And if he fails Nespoli, called "Rocky" by his colleagues for his strapping build and advanced age, is serene. "I think about it...but those Italians had better hurry up and get that meal over here," he jokes. For it is not only launch, but lunch – or *pranzo*. \* \* \* If you are still wondering about that 'follow the money' game in Texas and the U.S. presidential elections 2008: This, just in from Houston: Rudolph Giuliani, who works for a Houston Law office, has "cleaned up" most Republican donors and has brought in most campaign funds from the state. But for one exception: George Bush Senior who backing Mitt Romney. Why? Stay tuned, Houston.

\* Dennis Redmont, an executive at the Council for U.S. and [Italy](#), is an American journalist and consultant, who divides his time between Rome and Istanbul. He recently visited NASA. He can be contacted at [mediadennis@libero.it](mailto:mediadennis@libero.it)

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