

Hello and welcome! I'm Jim Tedder in Washington with the program that helps you learn and improve your American English. Today we have something special for you. We will meet with some friends not far from the VOA studios and ...all together ...look up at the night sky in search of a wonderful machine, far above us.

Listen carefully. There is some important information near the end that you can use. You are listening to VOA.

Americans often watch television or go to movies or parties on weekends. But on a recent Saturday night, a few people met for an unusual activity at a public park in Bethesda, Maryland. A neighbor had invited them to watch the International Space Station pass overhead.

The park had few lights to compete with stars and other objects in the sky. That helped make it possible to find the International Space Station just by looking up. No special equipment was needed.

At the time, the space station was carrying six crew members. They represented the space programs in Russia, Japan and the United States. Three of the men returned safely to Earth not long after the sighting in Maryland.

Oleg Kotov commanded the return trip to Kazakhstan. He is a pilot, an officer in the Russian Air Force and a medical doctor who was born in Crimea. With him were Russian cosmonaut Sergei Ryazanskiy and American astronaut Mike Hopkins.

Three other men stayed on the ISS. Three others joined them after leaving the Baikonur Cosmodrome on March 25th.

Back in Maryland, the space station watchers gathered among children's swings and toy cars. They sought to identify the stars and planets in the clear night sky. One woman repeatedly looked at her wristwatch.

"Hey, there it is," called a man. He pointed at yellow, red and blue lights sailing through the night. But no, that was an airplane.

“Isn’t that it,” cried another watcher? She caught sight of a lighted object as it moved through the skies. No, that also was a plane. The woman worried that perhaps they had missed the sighting.

Luckily, help was available. Retired television engineer Paul Monte-Bovi served as a kind of guide and host for the Saturday night event. He has belonged for many years to one of America’s largest amateur astronomy clubs.

Mr. Monte-Bovi owns three telescopes. He noted that the space station might look as if it were on the same level with airplanes. But he said it is really more than 300 kilometers up in the sky. And its light looks bright white. The ISS does not show up as the yellowish color of the stars and other objects in the sky.

“It does look like an airplane, the difference being that the space station does not have flashing lights.”

The Maryland sky watchers found the ISS by looking to the northwest and watching it move southeast. NASA, the American space agency, says that it not usually the case. But the space station's trajectories, the curved paths, differ.

As promised, the station appeared at the predicted time. That night, it was first observed at 7:44 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time, and seen for about four minutes.

"It is way high, and it's traveling in a continuous move."

Paul Monte-Bovi said what the people were seeing was the reflection of the sunlight on the station's solar panels. This equipment produce the many kilowatts of power required to keep the space station operating. And it seems that bright dot in the sky is huge. The panels alone cover four tenths of one hectare.

One of the sky watchers asked the others to predict what the crew members were doing overhead. That question remained unanswered. But people could find out what the space station would do in the coming week.

For example, on the following Tuesday and Thursday, the station deployed micro-satellites known as NanoRacksCubeSats. These devices are supposed to increase scientific observation of the Earth. Another goal for the ISS is to learn the effects of space on human bodies. Crew members tested those effects on their mental abilities and organs including the heart and bones.

Another experiment is meant to increase our understanding of protein structure and how proteins operate. Improved understanding of proteins might someday provide treatment for several currently incurable conditions.

It was a comet, not a space station, that got Paul Monte-Bovi interested in amateur astronomy in 1997. The comet Hale-Bopp had been discovered just two years earlier. Some people say it was the brightest comet in history. He remembered the event.

“I heard about comets but never thought I would be able to see one. And a neighbor came by and said ‘Let’s go see the comet. I hear it’s out tonight.’ And I had a breathtaking view. ”

That experience led him to join the Northern Virginia Astronomy Club. Recently, another club member told him that NASA provides information about the times and places when people can see the ISS.

Mr. Monte-Bovi is among about 85,000 people who have asked for that information. Now he asks neighbors to join him for sightings when he thinks the ISS would be easiest to see.

“We have neighbors who have some young children who are real space cadets ((fans)). They love anything to do with the night sky.... I thought it would be fun to have the rest of the neighborhood become aware of it...”

NASA’s Mission Control provides the details about where it is possible to see the International Space Station in 4,600 places around the world. You can ask to receive an e-mail telling when you can expect to see the ISS near home. If your community is not on the list, choose a place that is close. For more information, go to spotthestation.nasa.gov.

When we are not looking up at the night sky, we Americans often spend our free time by reading books. According to the New York Times newspaper, the most popular fiction book in the United States is "Missing You." It was written by Harlan Coben. It is the story of Kat Donovan, a New York police detective who searches for the lover who left her years before.

The number one non-fiction book is "Twelve Years a Slave, by Solomon Northup. The story was first published in 1853. It tells of a freeman who was kidnapped and sold into slavery, and spent 12 years in bondage before escaping. The book was made into an award-winning movie.

Well, it's time for us to move aside so you can hear some more Learning English programs. And if you want to find out more about what is happening in our world, there is a complete news broadcast at the beginning of the hour. Let's get together again tomorrow, right here on VOA. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington.

