

SPACE COAST, FLORIDA

# Rocket science for tourists

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



**Space odyssey:** (clockwise, from above) A signboard for the Kennedy Space Center; an alligator on the road; and the Saturn V.

**A beach holiday on which you can gawk at the rocket that launched the first flight to the moon**



BY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

Even though I know that going to the moon would need a considerably large rocket, I am still not prepared for the *Saturn V*. I am looking up the length of the rocket that launched the *Apollo 11*—the world's first manned space flight—in 1969. Neil Armstrong, Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin and Michael Collins may well be the names the world lauds for the landing, but, arguably, the *Saturn V* moon rocket was the real hero. Comprising three stages and the *Apollo* module, it is 363ft long, making it, according to US space agency Nasa, "about as tall as a 36-story building or 60 feet taller than the Statue of Liberty". It weighs 2.8 million kilograms, "about 400 elephants".

Standing beneath the *Saturn V*, I remember a bunker in northern France where, a few years ago, I had stood under another rocket—the *V-2*, the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile and Nazi Germany's last hope for turning the war against the Allies. The 'V' is for *Vergeltungswaffe*, German for "retaliation weapon". The first stages of the two rockets are similar, but that's not the only similarity: They were designed by the same man, Wernher von Braun. The man who built the *V-2* for Adolf Hitler in 1944 was the same man who built the *Saturn V* for America's first manned moon mission. This is among the many interesting stories that I discover during my time on Florida's Space Coast.

Let's get the geography out of the way. The "Space Coast" is the nickname given to the 120km of barrier-island Atlantic coast that runs from Vero Beach in south Florida to Canaveral National Seashore in the north. Between these two markers is the tourist hub of Cocoa Beach and Merritt

Island, which together pack in the quintessential Florida experience—great surf, sandy white beaches, superb seafood and a plethora of activities that include airboating to gaze at gators or stand-up paddle-boarding in the company of manatees.

The heart of the Space Coast, however, is the 144,000-acre John F Kennedy Space Center, from where moon-mission rockets and space shuttles lifted off for nearly half a century. When, in 1958, the newly formed Nasa was looking for the perfect location, it chose the barrier coast; its geographical location close to the equator means there is less gravitational pull, a useful feature when you have to lift huge payloads into space.

Of the thousands of acres of scrubland commandeered at the northern end of Merritt Island, nearly one-third was cleared for Nasa's launch pads and hangars, from where rockets and astronauts would blast into space. The remainder was turned into the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and the Canaveral National Seashore. Collectively, the refuge and the seashore providing Nasa with a secure buffer of unspoiled saltwater marshes, pine flatwoods and scrubs housing over 500 species of wildlife.

Which is why when I step out of my car to take a picture close to the Kennedy Space Center, I see some tourists waving frantically from their car. I wave back with as much enthusiasm, but I soon realize that they

are asking me to look behind me. I do and get the shock of my life because 20ft behind me is a 10-foot-long alligator that has stepped out of the canal bordering the road.

After the manned shuttle programme was terminated in 2011, the centre has become more of a historical museum, but unmanned rockets still lift off to carry parts and provisions to the International Space Station (ISS) or to put satellites into orbit.

The exhibits at the Kennedy Space Center will fascinate even those with just a passing interest in rockets, space and aeronautics. Due to security restrictions, the *Apollo/Saturn V* area can only be accessed by a bus tour

from within the centre. The queues are long, but it is not a tour to be missed. Besides getting to stare in awe at the *Saturn V* up close, you will see and stand 2ft away from the real *Apollo 14* command module that touched down on the moon on 9 February 1971.

On the bus to the centre, grab the seats on the right, even though the driver-cum-tour guide says the views from both sides of the bus are good. As the bus makes its way past launch pads and launch assembly vehicles, you can see areas and sights that only astronauts or people directly connected to launches get to see.

Back in the main part of the

centre, the second best exhibit is the space shuttle *Atlantis*. The multimedia experience leading to the final area, where the shuttle is displayed at the same angle at which it orbits, is phenomenal. The shuttle was probably the world's (or the universe's) most expensive goods carrier. Seeing it with its payload doors open, it is easy to understand the vast amount of cargo it could take up into space. The ISS owes its creation largely to the various space shuttles that took up huge amounts of component parts to allow it to be constructed in outer space.

Set respectfully apart from the hustle bustle is a poignant memorial to those who lost their lives on space missions, including India-born Kalpana Chawla, who died along with the rest of the crew when *Columbia* blew up 16 minutes before its scheduled landing on 1 February 2003.

There is more to the Space Coast than the Kennedy Space Center, though. The Air Force Space and Missile Museum is home to two adjoining launch complexes, from which the first successful flights of the 1950s and the three monkeys—a squirrel monkey called Gordo, in 1958, and two more, a squirrel monkey named Baker and a rhesus monkey, Able, in 1959—blasted off towards space

(Gordo never made it back, but Able and Baker did). The museum itself is filled with exhibits and memorabilia from the early days when the US and the Soviet Union were in a race to get to space. And right next to the museum is entrepreneur Elon Musk's SpaceX launch control centre (not open to visitors).

The Exploration Tower at Port Canaveral, which offers sweeping views of the port, the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station and the Kennedy Space Center, features museum-quality displays of the area's history, the space programme and the ecology. It is here that I saw one of the rare displays that spoke about Operation Paperclip—the US military's secret mission to smuggle Nazi rocket scientists out of Europe before the Soviets could get to them. Von Braun was the prize catch.

It can get a little overwhelming, and it is possible to get "rocketed out". The cure for that is to spend your evening at the Cocoa Beach Pier, which has plenty of bars and restaurants by the sea, or undertake some retail therapy at Ron Jon's Surf Shop, one of the world's largest surf-gear shops.

Thanks to Orlando's many theme parks, most famously the original Disney World, Florida often tends to be only about make-believe family holidays. The experience of Florida's Space Coast is larger than life too, but you better believe it.

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