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Sky at Night

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FIELD OF VIEW

A landmark of space exploration

Andrew Grasmann recalls a visit to Baikonur Cosmodrome with Patrick Moore



◀ 4. Up-close to a giant booster rocket for the Buran shuttle programme.

5. The Cosmonaut Hotel where Andrew stayed during his visit to Baikonur



◀ 1. In 1991 Patrick Moore was filmed for *The Sky at Night* from Baikonur Cosmodrome.

2. A view of a Soyuz capsule that was being assembled...

3. ...and of Progress M-7 as it launched with supplies to Mir

Back in March 1991, I had the good fortune to travel with *The Sky at Night* team to Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan to see its rocket assembly and view a launch of a supply ship to the Mir Space Station.

Sky at Night producer Pieter Morpurgo had the idea of visiting Baikonur and got approval from the Soviet space authorities for the trip. To spread the cost, the trip was organised in collaboration with Explorers Tours – a specialist in astronomy trips – and a dozen space enthusiasts were offered the chance to go on this unique, once-in-a-lifetime experience. I was among the lucky 12 to be selected for the trip, which also included Dr John Mason, a regular guest on *The Sky at Night*, as well as Patrick Moore himself.

The group flew to Moscow and we were then taken in the dead of night to another airfield outside the

city, to be flown 2,500km in an Antonov An-72 transport plane to Baikonur in Kazakhstan. As we arrived, we were greeted by a very cold, bleak snow-covered landscape. We had a police escort from the airfield to the Baikonur

Cosmodrome, where we were shown the launch pad used by Vostok 1 with Uri Gagarin, the first human in space.

We then travelled to the Assembly Complex. Initially, I was underwhelmed when I saw some dilapidated warehouse-type buildings, but my breath was taken away when we entered the first building and saw a Proton rocket lying on the floor.

The scientists we saw were thrilled to be able to talk about their work and were very open with us. We were taken to see the Buran shuttle, which was almost identical to the US Space Shuttle. It was a thrill to be able to see it close up.

We were then taken to the Soyuz capsule assembly building, and were shown the capsule which was being readied for the Juno mission – which British astronaut Helen Sharman would be launched in.

In the museum on the site, we entered the Lunar Explorations room, where Patrick saw in one of the display cases 'The Patrick Moore Moon Globe'. The curator of the museum quickly opened the case and got Patrick to sign the base of the globe in felt pen. Patrick was then invited to sign the visitors' book, containing all the names of dignitaries who had visited.

The day's finale was seeing a launch of Progress M-7, a supply ship for the Mir Space Station. Watching it from a 3km distance and the viewing stand normally reserved for dignitaries and leaders, we had a good vantage point. Our overnight stay was in the same hotel used by the cosmonauts before their flights.

Being a space enthusiast from my childhood and following the Apollo missions, it was a real highlight of my life to get such close-up views of the Soviet launch facilities and assembly, and I even featured in the broadcast programme saying why I was on the trip. 🌌



Andrew Grasmann is a lifelong amateur astronomer and space enthusiast, and a member of Bristol Astronomical Society (BAS)