

April 12, a Space date :

60 years of the first man in Space and 40 years of the Shuttle

"From up here the Earth is beautiful, without boundaries or borders", Juri Alexieievich Gagarin.

It was April 12, 1961 when Juri Alexieievich Gagarin was the first human being to orbit the Earth aboard the Vostok 1 spacecraft, beating America once again in the middle of the Cold War, after the successful launch of Sputnik 1 on October 4, 1957. Gagarin entered the Vostok 1 spacecraft at 7:10 a.m., but a technical problem with the closing hatch, which was later solved, delayed the launch by almost an hour.



Then the extraordinary enterprise began: the probe travelled in an almost complete orbit around the Earth in 106 minutes, a speed of 27,000 km/h and a distance from the Earth's surface of 327 km.

No man had ever done this; America arrived in orbit only after 23 days with Alan Shepard on May 5, 1961 aboard the Freedom 7 spacecraft.

Juri Gagarin was the first human being to see the spherical shape of the Earth and to experience the absence of gravity by witnessing an unprecedented and wonderful spectacle from the small porthole of Vostok 1.



Upon his return, Gagarin became a national icon and an international celebrity; the Soviet propaganda machine went to work and of course also the philatelic one: just 24 hours after the landing of Yuri Gagarin, on 13 April 1961, the first USSR postage stamp was issued, followed, on the 17th, by two other specimens celebrating the extraordinary feat and its protagonist, and then, by the rest of the world with hundreds of stamps commemorative of the first man in Space.

In this struggle between superpowers - and opposing ideologies - to conquer the unknown, mail had the role and task of being a testimony of the moment, then, and in the future to come, up to the present day.



Envelopes, letters, space letters and stamps that tell of Space flights and scientific achievements that have entered humanity's Gotha.

April 12, 1981: NASA called it "the boldest flight in history".

Space Shuttle Columbia, the STS-1, commanded by veteran John Young and piloted by Robert Crippen, brought America to the fore : it was not only the first reusable manned vehicle but also the first ever flight tested with a real crew aboard, to land aboard a spacecraft on a runway.

Between 12 and 14 April Young and Crippen managed to carry out 36 orbits, successfully completing the feat that started the Shuttle era.

6 were the Orbiters built by NASA : the Enterprise, which was the first, not equipped for missions in orbit but to test assembly procedures and various technical requirements, the Challenger, the Columbia, the Discovery, the Atlantis and the Endeavour (built after Challenger's destruction).



First launched into orbit exactly 40 years ago, on 12 April 1981, it completed its last mission on 21 July 2011, with 135 launches including the two tragedies of the STS-51L Challenger on 28 January 1986 and the STS-107 Columbia on February 1, 2003, with the death of the entire crews.



But in its long career, the objectives have been many and successful: the launch and maintenance of satellites including the most famous one at the Hubble Space Telescope, the launch of space probes (Magellan, Galileo, Ulysses), research in

the field of microgravity and the experiments conducted in Shuttles Spacelab, the beginning of commercial launches development and logically all the services for Mir space stations (known the Shuttle-Mir program, the first collaboration between the two powers after the Apollo-Soyuz program of 1975) and the International Space Station.

And for every space enterprise, mail has been, is and will be a testimony to its history: even for the Shuttles, thousands of postage stamps, commemorative envelopes and cosmograms document the essence of "living in Space".

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