

Visit to Russian space station Mir is quite an adventure

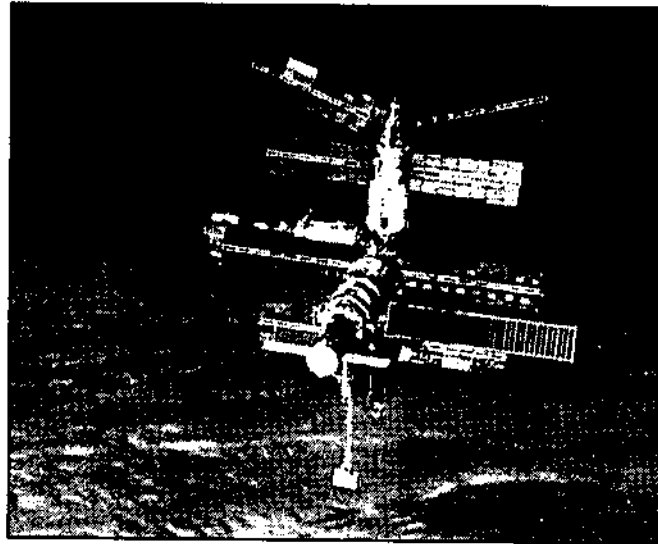
By John Gregory
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Visitors to San Diego's Reuben H. Fleet Science Center in Balboa Park may enjoy an out-of-this-world experience as the IMAX film "Mission to Mir" begins its run on Jan. 12.

Mir, meaning "peace" in Russian, is the accident-plagued Russian space station which played home to a number of cosmonauts as well as visiting American astronauts in the '90s. The station has also hosted teams of international scientists since 1986.

The Russians have lived and worked in space stations since 1971, but Mir is the first long-term station that has been continually occupied. Mir consists of six modules that have been fastened together. The first was launched in 1986.

"Mission to Mir" is billed as a larger than life documentary combining historical footage with breathtaking action shots. It is intended to emphasize the cooperation between the United States and Russia as the two super powers accomplish more through working to-



The Associated Press

The Russian space station Mir is the subject of an IMAX film, "Mission to Mir," which begins its run Jan. 12 at San Diego's Reuben H. Fleet Science Center in Balboa Park.

gether in space than by competing as Cold War rivals.

While the film promotes the spectacular views (many of Earth from space), the camaraderie developed between the crews and the success of cooperation between countries, the historical realities

captured may be of more significance. The segment about preparations undergone by cosmonauts, for example, takes viewers on a rare trip to the Russian training facility known as Star City. Then, the IMAX team films a launch of a Soyuz rocket from Baikonur, a site

inside Russia previously so secret that it was not printed on any maps. The Russians used the Soyuz space vehicle to transport men and materials to Mir.

The filming extended to four separate space shuttle flights which included one rendezvous flight and three docking missions. One mission was made by the space shuttle Discovery and three by Atlantis. Mir weighs 130 tons and each space shuttle weighs 100 tons, so the delicate docking procedure between the two involves 230 tons of space hardware.

But the more telling aspect of this film may be the parts documenting first-hand accounts of Norm Thagrad and Shannon Lucid, the first two American astronauts to stay aboard Mir.

Lucid spent a record-breaking 188 days on Mir, from March 21 to Sept. 24, 1996. This made her the first American, male or female, to spend that much time in space. Cosmonaut Valeri Polyakov set the record aboard Mir for the longest amount of time a human has ever spent in space — 14 months.

But history buffs might recall the fact that Mir suffered a number of

malfunctions during its last few years of use. In fact, critics in Congress were openly recommending that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration pull American teams out of the project before anyone was killed.

Today, Russia's Space Station Mir is considered a floating piece of junk by many in the aerospace industry as it continues to orbit the Earth 16 times a day, unoccupied. Still, some international entrepreneurs scheme about charging earthlings a huge sum to spend time aboard this aging contraption.

U.S. astronauts were trained to work the special IMAX cameras to help film this cinematic creation. Viewers to the Fleet Science Center will experience the result as they lean back in cushy chairs and sight-in on the huge "wraparound screen" inside the center's geodesic dome.

IMAX Dome Theater and Exhibit Galleries, Balboa Park, \$11 adults, \$9 seniors, \$8 juniors, (619) 238-1233. www.rhfleet.org

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