

MIR, MIR...Falling From Space

(NAPSA)—A small resort town in Wisconsin is not where most people would expect to get a lesson in Russian space history. But that's exactly where people have to travel to see what a MIR Space Station core module actually looks like, inside and out.

"Yes, it is a real piece of Russian space hardware," said Tom Diehl, who brokered the difficult negotiations to acquire the 43-foot long MIR core module from Russia and relocate it to America's Heartland. "This is the only place on Earth where people can see, feel and experience the MIR."

The exhibit is on permanent display at Tommy Bartlett's Robot World & Exploratory in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin. Long popular with Midwestern vacationers, the picturesque "Dells" area draws three million visitors each year, several hundred thousand of whom visit the MIR display.

So how did the MIR land in Wisconsin, of all places? In 1996, Tommy Bartlett, a well-known entertainment and tourism promoter, learned that a Moscow museum in need of money was trying to sell a real MIR core module. Bartlett thought it would be a good fit for Robot World, which features interactive scientific and educational exhibits, so he bought it. Dr. Norman E. Thagard, the first American astronaut to live on the MIR in space, served as a consultant to ensure authenticity of the exhibit. The Robot World MIR is set up to give visitors a physical sense of life in space. Some visitors experience slight dizziness and loss of balance.

The MIR Space Station is comprised of several modules connected together in space. The 20.4-ton MIR core module is the heart of the entire structure, providing the living quarters, life support,



Visitors can experience this real MIR Space Station core module at Tommy Bartlett's Robot World & Exploratory in Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin.

power, scientific research capabilities and docking area. Though three MIR core modules were built, only one made it into space before the end of the Soviet Union's space program. The Robot World MIR is one of two remaining core modules built to the same specifications as the orbiting MIR. The other is warehoused in Russia.

The MIR has been an extremely popular exhibit since its installment at Robot World nearly four years ago. In the coming months, however, it is likely to become much more significant, since the most famous MIR—the one in space—is scheduled to be de-orbited on March 6, 2001. The 15-year-old space station is expected to burn up in the Earth's atmosphere, leaving the Robot World MIR as the last remaining tangible symbol of the once-proud Soviet space program.

"It will be sad to see the MIR come down," said Diehl, who, after Bartlett's death two years ago, became owner of the corporation.

"From the start of our project, we have watched the progress of the MIR mission and have been used as a reference source along the way," said Diehl. "During the summer of 1997, when a Russian supply ship collided with the MIR in space, CNN sent a crew to Robot World and brought in Dr. Thagard to use our MIR exhibit to explain what happened with the near catastrophe and to follow the repair work as it occurred."

Although it has been a bumpy ride, the MIR program paved the way for the new multi-national effort to build an International Space Station, which Diehl expects will boost interest in the Robot World exhibit.

"People seem to have a natural curiosity about space travel and are drawn to the uniqueness of living in space," said Diehl.

Tommy Bartlett's Robot World & Exploratory is open daily, year round. For more information, please call (608) 254-2525 or visit www.tommybartlett.com.