

Reliving life among stars and galaxies

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DEMYSTIFYING SPACE: (From left) A view of the Himalayas and the Brahmaputra taken from aboard the Hubble telescope. A photo of the Orion Nebula taken from space. Former astronaut Claude Nicollier talks on his space walk in Bangalore on Tuesday

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Bangalore: Thousands of miles above the atmosphere, the earth looks beautiful. The space is deep black. The stars, in millions, are an amazing sight. The sun rises, first a sliver and then a full-born giant every few hours. The day is one hour long, it's night then for just half hour. The breathtaking secrets and colours that the universe reveals can be very distracting. That is when you need to force yourself to work and not waste time looking at the stars and the earth if you have to succeed, narrated Claude Nicollier, a former astronaut with the European Space Agency.

On a tour in the country for the 60th anniversary of a friendship treaty between India and Switzerland where he is now settled, Nicollier was recounting his experiences in space aboard a service mission on the Hubble telescope. The former astronaut was part of four space flights and undertook space walking to repair the Hubble telescope on a service mission.

Nicollier's wait to be on his first space flight was about 12 years, a time when he was the only non-American member in the team. "The 1993 service mission on Hubble was a very critical one and the team was told that failure was just not an option. Virtual reality was used in the high pressure training we had to undergo. But the gratification is the things we got to see, the stars, the Earth," he said.

Peppering his talk with fantastic images from space, Nicollier marvelled at the wondrous sight of the Milky Way rising as the most

OUT-OF-WORLD EXPERIENCE

Voicing his concern over the trend of space tourists, Nicollier said that though it was beautiful to look at the stars and the earth from space, physiologically, the space tourist would have to get adjusted first. It is pretty much like sea sickness but goes away in a day. To be an astronaut, he said that it was not necessary to be an athlete. Certain degrees of physical, educational and psychological qualities were needed but it was also a lot about luck, he said, adding that passion was the biggest thing in life. Nicollier added that the 5th service mission of Hubble would be launched in October 2008. A James Webb telescope is being launched in 2013, he added.

Some spacewalking experiences

- Cannot do it if you are claustrophobic; the suit is almost like carrying a mini space ship.
- The body has to be stabilised.
- All the tools and the astronauts are attached to tethers and astronauts do not leave behind any junk.
- Cannot rush or you will waste time and lose control.

beautiful sight he had ever seen. He compared spacewalking to ballet and said that an astronaut could be out with the space suit on for not more than 8.5 hours. There is no time to look at the stars or the Earth, he mused.

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