

'A space walk is like doing a ballet'

You need not be an athlete to be an astronaut: Claude Nicollier

Staff Reporter

BANGALORE: In 1993, Claude Nicollier, former European Space Agency (ESA) astronaut, had his first "handshake" with the Hubble Space Telescope. The Hubble, one of the largest and most expensive telescopes in space, had heralded a new era in space exploration, bringing back to Earth spectacular images of the universe. But the two billion dollar project, developed by NASA and ESA, had embarrassingly devel-



Claude Nicollier

oped technical problems quite early into its launch. "Failure was not an option," NASA had told the scientists who were about to embark on the servicing mission, one of

whom was Prof. Nicollier. Speaking to a small gathering of scientists at the Indian Institute of Astrophysics here on Tuesday, Prof. Nicollier, recounted his experiences in space, and more specifically of his space walk in 1999 during his second Hubble-mission where he was to restore its optical capability. It took a rigorous training programme, some of it conducted in a virtual reality laboratory and some in water where weightless conditions were simulated, but nothing

in the world could parallel the "fear, the challenge and the gratification" of a space mission, he said. His power point presentation gave his audience a sense of the Earth as seen from space, the blue of the Mediterranean Sea, the gash of the Nile across North Africa, and the Himalayas that looked like a scattering of snow flakes. "A space walk is like doing a ballet: we have to be trained to do what we do, and do as we are told. We cannot be out for more than eight hours at a stretch, the

space suit with its cooling system will not allow it." "What makes a good astronaut?" asked someone from the audience. It turns out that you do not need to be an athlete to be one. "You need to be in reasonably good physical and psychological health and have appropriate education. But it is a competitive field, so you need a dose of good luck too," he said. "And yes, it is not your kind of thing if you are claustrophobic. Space suits are not easy to carry on you for lengths of time!"