

The Solar System

Our automated spacecraft have traveled to the Moon and to all the planets beyond our world except Pluto; they have observed moons as large as small planets, flown by comets, and sampled the solar environment. The knowledge gained from our journeys through the solar system has redefined traditional Earth sciences like geology and meteorology and spawned an entirely new discipline called comparative planetology. By studying the geology of planets, moons, asteroids, and comets, and comparing differences and similarities, we are learning more about the origin and history of these bodies and the solar system as a whole. We are also gaining insight into Earth's complex weather systems. By seeing how weather is shaped on other worlds and by investigating the Sun's activity and its influence through the solar system, we can better understand climatic conditions and processes on Earth.

The Sun

Many spacecraft have explored the Sun's environment, but none have gotten any closer to its surface than approximately two-thirds of the distance from Earth to the Sun. Pioneers 5-11, the Pioneer Venus Orbiter, Voyagers 1 and 2, and other spacecraft have all sampled the solar environment. The Ulysses spacecraft, launched Oct 6, 1990, is a joint solar mission of NASA and the European Space Agency. After using Jupiter's gravity to change its trajectory, Ulysses will fly over the Sun's polar regions during 1994 and 1995 and will perform a wide range of studies using nine onboard scientific instruments.

The Sun dwarfs the other bodies in the solar system, representing approximately 99.86 percent of all the mass in the solar system. All of the planets, moons, asteroids, comets, dust, and gas add up to only about 0.14 percent. This 0.14 percent represents the material left over from the Sun's formation. One hundred and nine Earths would be required to fit across the Sun's disk, and its interior could hold 700,000 Earths.

As a star, the Sun generates energy by the process of fusion. The temperature at the Sun's core is 15 million degrees Celsius (27 million degrees Fahrenheit), and the pressure there is 340 billion times Earth's air pressure at sea level. The Sun's surface temperature of 5,500 degrees Celsius (10,000 degrees Fahrenheit) seems almost chilly compared to its core temperature. At the solar core, hydrogen can fuse into helium, producing energy. The Sun produces a strong magnetic field and streams of charged particles, extending far beyond the planets.

The Sun appears to have been active for 4.6 billion years and has enough fuel for another 5 billion years or so. At the end of its life, the Sun will start to fuse helium into heavier elements and begin to swell up, ultimately growing so large that it will swallow Earth. After a billion years as a "red giant," it will suddenly collapse into a "white dwarf" -- the final end product of a star like ours. It may take a trillion years to cool off completely.

Mercury

Obtaining the first close-up views of Mercury was the primary objective of the Mariner 10 spacecraft, launched Nov 3, 1973. After a journey of nearly 5 months, including a flyby of Venus, the spacecraft passed within 703 km (437 mi) of the solar system's innermost planet on Mar 29, 1974. Until Mariner 10, little was known about Mercury. Even the best telescopic views from Earth showed Mercury as an indistinct object lacking any surface detail. The planet is so close to the Sun that it is usually lost in solar glare. When the planet is visible on Earth's horizon just after sunset or before dawn, it is obscured by the haze and dust in our atmosphere. Only radar telescopes gave any hint of Mercury's surface conditions prior to the voyage of Mariner 10.

Mariner 10 photographs revealed an ancient, heavily cratered surface, closely resembling our Moon. The pictures also showed high cliffs crisscrossing the planet, apparently created when Mercury's interior cooled and shrank, buckling the planet's crust. The cliffs are as high as 3 km (2 mi) and as long as 500 km (310 mi).

Instruments on Mariner 10 discovered that Mercury has a weak magnetic field and a trace of atmosphere -- a trillionth the density of Earth's atmosphere and composed chiefly of argon, neon, and helium. When the planet's orbit takes it closest to the Sun, surface temperatures range from 467 degrees Celsius (872 degrees Fahrenheit) on Mercury's sunlit side to -183 degrees Celsius (-298 degrees Fahrenheit) on the dark side. This range in surface temperature is the largest for a single body in the solar system. Mercury literally bakes and freezes at the same time.

Days and nights are long on Mercury. The combination of a slow rotation relative to the stars (59 Earth days) and a rapid revolution around the Sun (88 Earth days) means that one Mercury solar day takes 176 Earth days or two Mercury years, the time it takes Mercury to complete two orbits around the Sun.

The Solar System

Mercury appears to have a crust of light silicate rock like that of Earth. Scientists believe Mercury has a heavy iron-rich core making up slightly less than half of its volume. That would make Mercury's core larger, proportionally, than the Moon's core or those of any of the planets.

After the initial Mercury encounter, Mariner 10 made two additional flybys -- on Sep 21, 1974, and Mar 16, 1975 -- before control gas used to orient the spacecraft was exhausted and the mission was concluded. Each flyby took place at the same local Mercury time when the identical half of the planet was illuminated; as a result, we still have not seen one-half of the planet's surface.

Venus

Veiled by dense cloud cover, Venus -- our nearest planetary neighbor -- was the first planet to be explored. The Mariner 2 spacecraft, launched Aug 27, 1962, was the first of more than a dozen successful American and Soviet missions to study the mysterious planet. On December 14, 1962, Mariner 2 passed within 34,839 kilometers (21,648 miles) of Venus and became the first spacecraft to scan another planet; onboard instruments measured Venus for 42 minutes. Mariner 5, launched in June 1967, flew much closer to the planet. Passing within 4,094 kilometers (2,544 miles) of Venus on the second American flyby, Mariner 5's instruments measured the planet's magnetic field, ionosphere, radiation belts, and temperatures. On its way to Mercury, Mariner 10 flew by Venus and transmitted ultraviolet pictures to Earth showing cloud circulation patterns in the Venusian atmosphere.

On Dec 4, 1978, the Pioneer Venus Orbiter became the first spacecraft to orbit the planet. Five days later, the five separate components making up a second spacecraft, the Pioneer Venus Multiprobe, entered the Venusian atmosphere at different locations above the planet. The four small probes and the main body radioed atmospheric data back to Earth during their descent toward the surface. Although designed to examine the atmosphere, one of the probes survived its impact with the surface and continued to transmit data for another hour.

Venus resembles Earth in size, physical composition, and density more closely than any other known planet. However, significant differences have been discovered. For example, Venus' rotation (west to east) is retrograde (backward) compared to the east-to-west spin of Earth and most of the other planets.

Approximately 96.5 percent of Venus' atmosphere (95 times as dense as Earth's) is carbon dioxide. The principal constituent of Earth's atmosphere is nitrogen. Venus' atmosphere acts like a greenhouse, permitting solar radiation to reach the surface but trapping the heat that would ordinarily be radiated back into space. As a result, the planet's average surface temperature is 482 degrees Celsius (900 degrees Fahrenheit), hot enough to melt lead.

A radio altimeter on the Pioneer Venus Orbiter provided the first means of seeing through the planet's dense cloud cover and determining surface features over almost the entire planet. NASA's Magellan spacecraft, launched on May 5, 1989, has orbited Venus since August 10, 1990. The spacecraft used radar-mapping techniques to provide ultrahigh-resolution images of the surface.

Magellan has revealed a landscape dominated by volcanic features, faults, and impact craters. Huge areas of the surface show evidence of multiple periods of lava flooding with flows lying on top of previous ones. An elevated region named Ishtar Terra is a lava-filled basin as large as the United States. At one end of this plateau sits Maxwell Montes, a mountain the size of Mount Everest. Scarring the mountain's flank is a 100-km (62-mi) wide, 2.5-km (1.5 mi) deep impact crater named Cleopatra. (Almost all features on Venus are named for women: Maxwell Montes, Alpha Regio, and Beta Regio are the exceptions.) Craters survive on Venus for perhaps 400 million years because there is no water and very little wind erosion.

The successful Magellan mission ended on October 12, 1994, when the spacecraft was commanded to drop lower into the fringes of the Venusian atmosphere during an aerodynamic experiment and it burned up, as expected. Magellan mapped 98 percent of the planet's surface with radar and compiled a high-resolution gravity map of 95 percent of the planet.

Extensive fault-line networks cover the planet, probably the result of the same crustal flexing that produces plate tectonics on Earth. But on Venus the surface temperature is sufficient to weaken the rock, which cracks just about everywhere, preventing the formation of major plates and large earthquake faults like the San Andreas Fault in California.

The Solar System

Venus' predominant weather pattern is a high-altitude, high-speed circulation of clouds that contain sulfuric acid. At speeds reaching as high as 360 km (225 mi) per hour, the clouds circle the planet in only 4 Earth days. The circulation is in the same direction -- west to east -- as Venus' slow rotation of 243 Earth days, whereas Earth's winds blow in both directions -- west to east and east to west -- in six alternating bands. Venus' atmosphere serves as a simplified laboratory for the study of our weather.

Earth

As viewed from space, Earth's distinguishing characteristics are its blue waters, brown and green land masses, and white clouds. We are enveloped by an ocean of air consisting of 78 percent nitrogen, 21 percent oxygen, and 1 percent other constituents. The only planet in the solar system known to harbor life, Earth orbits the Sun at an average distance of 150 million km (93 million mi). Earth is the third planet from the Sun and the fifth largest in the solar system, with a diameter a few hundred kilometers larger than that of Venus.

Our planet's rapid spin and molten nickel-iron core give rise to an extensive magnetic field, which, along with the atmosphere, shields us from nearly all of the harmful radiation coming from the Sun and other stars. Earth's atmosphere protects us from meteors as well, most of which burn up before they can strike the surface. Active geological processes have left no evidence of the pelting Earth almost certainly received soon after it formed -- about 4.6 billion years ago.

From our journeys into space, we have learned much about our home planet. The first American satellite -- Explorer 1 -- launched Jan 31, 1958, discovered an intense radiation zone, called the Van Allen radiation belts, surrounding Earth. Other research satellites revealed that our planet's magnetic field is distorted into a tear-drop shape by the solar wind. We've learned that the magnetic field does not fade off into space but has definite boundaries. And we now know that our wispy upper atmosphere, once believed calm and uneventful, seethes with activity -- swelling by day and contracting by night. Affected by changes in solar activity, the upper atmosphere contributes to weather and climate on Earth.

Besides affecting Earth's weather, solar activity gives rise to a dramatic visual phenomenon in our atmosphere. When charged particles from the solar wind become trapped in Earth's magnetic field, they collide with air molecules above our planet's magnetic poles. These air molecules then begin to glow and are known as the auroras or the northern and southern lights.

Satellites 36,000km (22,000 mi) out in space play a major role in daily local weather forecasting. These watchful electronic eyes warn us of dangerous storms. Continuous global monitoring provides a vast amount of useful data and contributes to a better understanding of Earth's complex weather systems.

The TOPEX/POSEIDON satellite, a joint NASA/French mission and part of the Mission to Planet Earth, is providing information of unprecedented accuracy about global ocean circulation. Radar altimeter measurements of sea height level in the mid Pacific, accurate within 5 cm. (2 in.), demonstrate the presence of a strong El Nino current in the 1994-95 winter. This has great importance for long range weather forecasting. Another element of the Mission to Planet Earth, the Total Ozone Monitoring Satellite (TOMS), stopped transmitting in Dec. '94 after exceeding its design lifetime by a year. This joint NASA/Russian effort provided essential data on ozone density and global distribution for the past 3 years. TOMS data are showing us how human activities can alter Earth's global environment. Two more TOMS satellites are to be flown by February, 1996.

The Moon

The Moon is Earth's single natural satellite. The first human footsteps on an alien world were made by American astronauts on the dusty surface of our airless, lifeless companion. In preparation for the Apollo expeditions, NASA dispatched the automated Ranger, Surveyor, and Lunar Orbiter spacecraft to study the Moon between 1964 and 1968.

NASA's Apollo program left a large legacy of lunar materials and data. Six 2-astronaut crews landed on and explored the lunar surface between 1969 and 1972, carrying back a collection of rocks and soil weighing a total of 382 kg (842 lb) and consisting of more than 2,000 separate samples. From this material and other studies, scientists have constructed a history of the Moon that includes its infancy.

The Solar System

Rocks collected from the lunar highlands date to about 4.0-4.3 billion years old. The first few million years of the Moon's existence were so violent that few traces of this period remain. As a molten outer layer gradually cooled and solidified into different kinds of rock, the Moon was bombarded by huge asteroids and smaller objects. Some of the asteroids were as large as Rhode Island or Delaware, and their collisions with the Moon created basins hundreds of kilometers across.

This catastrophic bombardment tapered off approximately 4 billion years ago, leaving the lunar highlands covered with huge, overlapping craters and a deep layer of shattered and broken rock. Heat produced by the decay of radioactive elements began to melt the interior at depths of about 200 km (125 mi) below the surface. For the next 700 million years, lava rose from inside the Moon and gradually spread out over the surface, flooding the large impact basins to form the dark areas that Galileo Galilei, an astronomer of the Italian Renaissance, called maria, meaning seas. As far as we can tell, there has been no significant volcanic activity on the Moon for more than 3 billion years. Since then, the lunar surface has been altered only by micrometeorites, atomic particles from the Sun and stars, rare impacts of large meteorites, and spacecraft and astronauts.

The origin of the Moon is still a mystery. Four theories attempt an explanation: The Moon formed near Earth as a separate body; it was torn from Earth; it formed somewhere else and was captured by our planet's gravity, or it was the result of a collision between Earth and an asteroid about the size of Mars. The last theory has some good support but is far from certain.

Mars

Mars has long been considered the solar system's prime candidate for harboring extraterrestrial life. Astronomers studying the red planet through telescopes saw what appeared to be straight lines criss-crossing its surface. These observations, later determined to be optical illusions, led to the popular notion that intelligent beings had constructed a system of irrigation canals. Another reason for scientists to expect life on Mars was the apparent seasonal color changes on the planet's surface. This phenomenon led to speculation that conditions might support vegetation during the warmer months and cause plant life to become dormant during colder periods.

Seven American missions to Mars have been carried out. Four Mariner spacecraft, three flying by the planet and one placed into martian orbit, surveyed the planet extensively before the Viking Orbiters and Landers arrived. Mariner 4, launched in late 1964, flew past Mars on Jul 14, 1965, within 9,846 km (6,118 mi) of the surface. Transmitting to Earth 22 close-up pictures of the planet, the spacecraft found many craters and naturally occurring channels but no evidence of artificial canals or flowing water. The Mariners 6 and 7 flybys, during the summer of 1969, returned 201 pictures. Mariners 4, 6, and 7 showed a diversity of surface conditions as well as a thin, cold, dry atmosphere of carbon dioxide.

On May 30, 1971, the Mariner 9 Orbiter was launched to make a year-long study of the martian surface. The spacecraft arrived 5-1/2 months after liftoff, only to find Mars in the midst of a planet-wide dust storm that made surface photography impossible for several weeks. After the storm cleared, Mariner 9 began returning the first of 7,329 pictures that revealed previously unknown martian features, including evidence that large amounts of water once flowed across the surface, etching river valleys and flood plains.

In Aug and Sep 1975, the Viking 1 and 2 spacecraft, each consisting of an orbiter and a lander, were launched. The mission was designed to answer several questions about the red planet, including, Is there life there? Nobody expected the spacecraft to spot martian cities, but it was hoped that the biology experiments would at least find evidence of primitive life, past or present..

Viking Lander 1 became the first spacecraft to successfully touch down on another planet when it landed on Jul 20, 1976. Photographs sent back from Chryse Planitia ("Plains of Gold") showed a bleak, rusty-red landscape. Panoramic images revealed a rolling plain, littered with rocks and marked by rippled sand dunes. Fine red dust from the martian soil gives the sky a salmon hue. When Viking Lander 2 touched down on Utopia Planitia on Sep 3, 1976, it viewed a more rolling landscape, one without visible dunes.

The Solar System

The results sent back by the laboratory on each Viking Lander were inconclusive. Small samples of the red martian soil were tested in three different experiments designed to detect biological processes. While some of the test results seemed to indicate biological activity, later analysis confirmed that this activity was inorganic in nature and related to the planet's soil chemistry. Is there life on Mars? No one knows for sure, but the Viking mission found no evidence that organic molecules exist there.

The Viking Landers became weather stations, recording wind velocity and direction as well as atmospheric temperature and pressure. The highest temperature recorded by either spacecraft was -14 degrees Celsius (7 degrees Fahrenheit) at the Viking Lander 1 site in midsummer. The lowest temperature, -120 degrees Celsius (-184 degrees Fahrenheit), was recorded in the more northerly Viking Lander 2 site during winter. Near-hurricane wind speeds were measured at the two martian weather stations during global dust storms, but because the atmosphere is so thin, wind force is minimal. Viking Lander 2 photographed light patches of frost, probably water-ice, during its second winter on the planet.

The martian atmosphere, like that of Venus, is primarily carbon dioxide. Nitrogen and oxygen are present only in small percentages. Martian air contains only about 1/1,000 as much water as our air, but this small amount can condense out, forming clouds that ride high in the atmosphere or swirl around the slopes of towering volcanoes. Patches of early morning fog can form in valleys. There is evidence that in the past a denser martian atmosphere may have allowed water to flow on the planet. Physical features closely resembling shorelines, gorges, riverbeds, and islands suggest that great rivers once marked the planet.

Mars has two moons, Phobos and Deimos. They are small and irregularly shaped and possess ancient, cratered surfaces. It is possible the moons were originally asteroids that ventured too close to Mars and were captured by its gravity.

The Viking Orbiters and Landers exceeded their design lifetimes of 120 and 90 days, respectively. The first to fail was Viking Orbiter 2, which stopped operating on Jul 24, 1978, when a leak depleted its attitude-control gas. Viking Lander 2 operated until Apr 12, 1980, when it was shut down due to battery degeneration. Viking Orbiter 1 quit on Aug 7, 1980, when the last of its attitude-control gas was used up. Viking Lander 1 ceased functioning on Nov 13, 1983. Despite the inconclusive results of the Viking biology experiments, we know more about Mars than any other planet except Earth. The Mars Observer mission, launched on Sept. 25, 1992, lost contact with Earth on April 21, 1993, just 3 days before it was to enter orbit around Mars.

NASA will continue to explore Mars, which a new exploration strategy called the Mars Surveyor program, calls for start of development of a small orbiter that will be launched in November 1996 to study the surface of the red planet.

The Mars Surveyor orbiter will lay the foundation for a series of missions to Mars in a decade-long program of Mars exploration. The missions will take advantage of launch opportunities about every 2 years as Mars comes into alignment with Earth.

The orbiter planned for launch in 1998 would be even smaller than the initial Mars Surveyor orbiter and carry the remainder of the Mars Observer science instruments. It would act as a communications relay satellite for a companion lander, launched the same year, and other landers in the future, such as the Russian Mars '96 lander. The U.S. Pathfinder lander, set to land on Mars in 1997, will operate independently of the Mars orbiter.

Asteroids

The solar system is populated by thousands of small planetesimals called asteroids that orbit the Sun in a broad belt between Mars and Jupiter. Some of these are of rocky composition, others are mainly iron and nickel; they are fragments and rocky splinters generated by the same processes that built the planets some four and a half billion years ago. Metallic asteroids are thought to be fragments of the central cores of small short-lived planets that were broken up soon after they formed by massive collisions with other similar objects; some of the rocky splinters may be pieces of the outer layers of such exploded planets while others could be primitive planet-building materials accumulated into rocks but that was never used in planet building.

The Solar System

The largest asteroid is called 1 Ceres (all asteroids have a number in their name) and is only 770km (480 mi) across; much smaller than the Moon. Most of the thousands of asteroids that are known are much smaller, in the 1 to 10 km size range. Innumerable, still small, fragments frequently collide with the Earth and, as they burn-up in the atmosphere, causing meteor trails. Some of the larger fragments reach the ground intact and become part of the meteorite collections in our museums. A few large asteroid collisions are recorded on the Earth's surface as craters. One of the best examples is the Baringer Meteor Crater near Winslow, Arizona. Some of the best preserved meteorites are found on the ice cap of Antarctica; however, not all of these come from asteroids, some may be debris from comets, and some pieces are thought to have originated on the surface of Mars.

The Galileo spacecraft passed twice through the asteroid belt on its six year journey from the Earth to Jupiter. On each occasion it visited an asteroid and made scientific measurements impossible from the Earth. On October 29, 1991, Galileo encountered 951 Gaspra at a distance of 1600 km to reveal a conical shaped, scarred and fractured, rock some 18 km long with a lightly cratered landscape; almost two years later, on August 28, 1993, Galileo passed by another larger asteroid, 243 Ida, at a distance of 2400 km to reveal an object of even more bizarre shape. In addition the data from the spacecraft showed that this asteroid has a satellite in orbit around it which has been named Dactyl. Ida itself is irregular in shape, some 56 km long and 24 km across. Its surface is covered by a deep layer of rubble on which many craters, fractures and boulders are superposed. Before the Galileo encounters it was expected that Ida, which is a member of the Koronis family of asteroids (an asteroid family is a group of asteroids on very small orbits that formed as the result of a catastrophic collision that broke up the parent asteroid), was relatively young, that is, it formed as the result of a recent collision, while Gaspra was expected to be relatively old. The surprising result of the Galileo investigations was to turn these ideas entirely around. Ida's densely cratered surface proved it to be very old, perhaps 1-2 billion years. Gaspra's lightly cratered surface showed it to have been formed relatively recently, a mere 200 million years ago.

NASA will send the Near Earth Asteroid Rendezvous (NEAR) spacecraft to orbit the asteroid 433 EROS in January 1999. The density, rotation, composition, and topography of the silicate rock asteroid will be measured.

Jupiter

Beyond Mars and the asteroid belt, in the outer regions of our solar system, lie the giant planets of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. In 1972, NASA sent the first of four spacecraft to conduct the initial surveys of these colossal worlds of gas and their moons of ice and rock.

Pioneer 10, launched in March 1972, was the first spacecraft to penetrate the asteroid belt and travel to the outer regions of the solar system. In December 1973, it returned the first close-up images of Jupiter, flying within 132,252 km (82,178 mi) of the planet's banded cloud tops. Pioneer 11 followed a year later. Voyagers 1 and 2, launched in the summer of 1977, returned spectacular photographs of Jupiter and its family of satellites during flybys in 1979. These travelers found Jupiter to be a whirling ball of liquid hydrogen and helium, topped with a colorful atmosphere composed mostly of gaseous hydrogen and helium. Ammonia ice crystals form white Jovian clouds. Sulfur compounds (and perhaps phosphorus) may produce the brown and orange hues that characterize Jupiter's atmosphere.

It is likely that methane, ammonia, water and other gases react to form organic molecules in the regions between the planet's frigid cloud tops and the warmer hydrogen ocean lying below. Because of Jupiter's atmospheric dynamics, however, these organic compounds, if they exist, are probably short-lived.

The Great Red Spot has been observed for centuries through telescopes on Earth. This hurricane-like storm in Jupiter's atmosphere is more than twice the size of our planet. As a high-pressure region, the Great Red Spot spins in a direction opposite to that of low-pressure storms on Jupiter; it is surrounded by swirling currents that rotate around the spot and are sometimes consumed by it. The Great Red Spot might be a million years old.

Our spacecraft detected lightning in Jupiter's upper atmosphere and observed auroral emissions similar to Earth's northern lights at the Jovian polar regions. Voyager 1 returned the first images of a faint, narrow ring encircling Jupiter. Largest of the solar system's planets, Jupiter rotates at a dizzying pace, once every 9 hours 55 minutes 30 seconds. The massive planet takes almost 12 Earth years to complete a journey around the Sun. With 16 known moons, Jupiter is something of a miniature solar system.

The Solar System

A new mission to Jupiter, the Galileo Project, is underway. After a 6-year cruise that so far has taken the Galileo Orbiter once past Venus, twice past Earth and the Moon, and once past two asteroids, the spacecraft will drop an atmospheric probe into Jupiter's cloud layers and relay data back to Earth. The Galileo Orbiter will spend 2 years circling the planet and flying close to Jupiter's large moons, exploring in detail what the two Pioneers and two Voyagers revealed.

"The year 1994 was one of great excitement in space science. In July some 20 fragments of the comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 crashed into Jupiter. An event of this magnitude occurs perhaps once in 1000 years. The knowledge that the comet would hit Jupiter came far too late to launch a spacecraft from earth that could arrive in the near vicinity in time for the event. The initial impacts were on the far side of the planet and went unobserved. However Jupiter's very rapid rotation (1 day = 10 hours) allowed the Hubble Space Telescope (HST) and other earth based and space based telescopes to observe the impact scars when they were only a few minutes old. Some of them were as large as Earth. The time evolution of the scars serves to test our understanding of energy deposition and fluid dynamics. The impacts briefly removed the curtain of high clouds that normally obscure our view to reveal details about the composition of Jupiter's lower atmosphere. There is controversy about how much of the sulfur and water observed arose from Jupiter as opposed to the cometary matter. Our observations yielded a rich store of data that will keep scientists occupied for some time to come.

Galilean Satellites

In 1610, Galileo Galilei aimed his telescope at Jupiter and spotted four points of light orbiting the planet. For the first time, humans had seen the moons of another world. In honor of their discoverer, these four bodies would become known as the Galilean satellites or moons. But Galileo might have happily traded this honor for one look at the dazzling photographs returned by the Voyager spacecraft as they flew past these planet-sized satellites.

One of the most remarkable findings of the Voyager mission was the presence of active volcanoes on the Galilean moon Io. Volcanic eruptions had never before been observed on a world other than Earth. The Voyager cameras identified at least nine active volcanoes on Io, with plumes of ejected material extending as far as 280 km (175 mi) above the moon's surface. Io's pizza-colored terrain, marked by orange and yellow hues, is probably the result of sulfur-rich materials brought to the surface by volcanic activity. Volcanic activity on this satellite is the result of tidal flexing caused by the gravitational tug-of-war between Io, Jupiter, and the other three Galilean moons

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Europa, approximately the same size as our Moon, is the brightest Galilean satellite. The moon's surface displays an array of streaks, indicating the crust has been fractured. Caught in a gravitational tug-of-war like Io, Europa has been heated enough to cause its interior ice to melt, producing a liquid-water ocean. This ocean is covered by an ice crust that has formed where water is exposed to the cold of space. "Astronomers using NASA's Hubble Space Telescope (HST) have identified the presence of an extremely tenuous atmosphere of molecular oxygen around Europa. It is so thin that the surface pressure is barely one hundred billion that of Earth. Free molecular oxygen is expected from the action of extreme ultraviolet radiation of Europa's water. The greatest significance of the observation is the astonishing sensitivity afforded by the HST." Europa's core is made of rock that sank to its center. Like Europa, the other two Galilean moons - Ganymede and Callisto - are worlds of ice and rock. Ganymede is the largest satellite in the solar system -- larger than the planets Mercury and Pluto. The satellite is composed of about 50 percent water or ice and the rest rock. Ganymede's surface has areas of different brightness, indicating that, in the past, material oozed out of the moon's interior and was deposited at various locations on the surface.

The Solar System

Callisto, only slightly smaller than Ganymede, has the lowest density of any Galilean satellite, suggesting that large amounts of water are part of its composition. Callisto is the most heavily cratered object in the solar system; no activity during its history has erased old craters except more impacts.

Detailed studies of all the Galilean satellites will be performed by the Galileo Orbiter.

Saturn

No planet in the solar system is adorned like Saturn. Its exquisite ring system is unrivaled. Like Jupiter, Saturn is composed mostly of hydrogen. But in contrast to the vivid colors and wild turbulence found in Jovian clouds, Saturn's atmosphere has a more subtle, butterscotch hue, and its markings are muted by high-altitude haze. Given Saturn's somewhat placid-looking appearance, scientists were surprised at the high-velocity equatorial jet stream that blows some 1,770 km (1,100 mi) per hour.

Three American spacecraft have visited Saturn. Pioneer 11 sped by the planet and its moon Titan in September 1979, returning the first close-up images. Voyager 1 followed in November 1980, sending back breathtaking photographs that revealed for the first time the complexities of Saturn's ring system and moons. Voyager 2 flew by the planet and its moons in August 1981.

The rings are composed of countless low-density particles orbiting individually around Saturn's equator at progressive distances from the cloud tops. Analysis of spacecraft radio waves passing through the rings showed that the particles vary widely in size, ranging from dust to house-sized boulders. The rings are bright because they are mostly ice and frosted rock.

The rings might have resulted when a moon or a passing body ventured too close to Saturn. The object would have been torn apart by great tidal forces on its surface and in its interior. Or the object may not have been fully formed and disintegrated under the influence of Saturn's gravity. A third possibility is that the object was shattered by collisions with larger objects orbiting the planet.

Unable either to form into a moon or to drift away from each other, individual ring particles appear to be held in place by the gravitational pull of Saturn and its satellites. These complex gravitational interactions form the thousands of ringlets that make up the major rings.

Radio emissions quite similar to the static heard on an AM car radio during an electrical storm were detected by the Voyager spacecraft. These emissions are typical of lightning but are believed to be coming from Saturn's ring system rather than its atmosphere, where no lightning was observed. As they had at Jupiter, the Voyagers saw a version of Earth's auroras near Saturn's poles.

The Voyagers discovered new moons and found several satellites that share the same orbit. We learned that some moons shepherd ring particles, maintaining Saturn's rings and the gaps in the rings. Saturn's 18th moon was discovered in 1990 from images taken by Voyager 2 in 1981.

Voyager 1 determined that Titan has a nitrogen-based atmosphere with methane and argon -- one more like Earth's in composition than the carbon dioxide atmosphere of Mars and Venus. Titan's surface temperature of -179 degrees Celsius (-290 degrees Fahrenheit) implies that there might be water-ice islands rising above oceans of ethane-methane liquid or sludge. Unfortunately, Voyager 1's cameras could not penetrate the moon's dense clouds.

Continuing photochemistry from solar radiation may be converting Titan's methane to ethane, acetylene and, in combination with nitrogen, hydrogen cyanide. These conditions may be similar to the atmospheric conditions of primeval Earth between 3 and 4 billion years ago. However, Titan's atmospheric temperature is believed to be too low to permit progress beyond this stage of organic chemistry.

A mission to Saturn, planned for launch in October 1997, may help answer many of the questions raised by the Voyager flybys about the Saturnian system. Called Cassini, the joint U.S. European Space Agency mission consists of an Orbiter and an instrumented probe call Huygens supplied by ESA. The mission is designed to complete an orbital surveillance of the planet and unveil Saturn's largest moon, Titan, by dropping the Huygens probe through Titan's intriguingly Earth-like atmosphere.

Cassini will fly by Venus twice as well as by Earth and Jupiter before arriving at Saturn in November 2004 to begin a 4-year orbital tour of the ringed planet and its 18 moons. The Huygens probe will descend to the surface of Titan in June 2005.

The Solar System

Uranus

In January 1986, 4-1/2 years after visiting Saturn, Voyager 2 completed the first close-up survey of the Uranian system. The brief flyby revealed more information about Uranus and its moons than had been gleaned from ground observations since its discovery over 2 centuries ago by English astronomer William Herschel.

Uranus, third largest of the planets, is an oddball of the solar system. Unlike the other planets (with the exception of Pluto), this giant lies tipped on its side with its north and south poles alternately facing the Sun during an 84-year swing around the solar system. During Voyager 2's flyby, the south pole faced the Sun. Uranus might have been knocked over when an Earth-sized object collided with it early in the life of the solar system.

Voyager 2 discovered that Uranus' magnetic field does not follow the usual north-south axis found on the other planets. Instead, the field is tilted 60 degrees and offset from the planet's center. A phenomenon that on Earth would be like having one magnetic pole in New York City and the other in the city of Djakarta, on the island of Java in Indonesia.

Uranus' atmosphere consists mainly of hydrogen, with some 12 percent helium and small amounts of ammonia, methane, and water vapor. The planet's blue color occurs because methane in its atmosphere absorbs all other colors. Wind speeds range up to 580 km (360 mi) per hour, and temperatures near the cloud tops average -221 degrees Celsius (-366 degrees Fahrenheit).

Uranus' sunlit south pole is shrouded in a kind of photochemical "smog" believed to be a combination of acetylene, ethane, and other sunlight-generated chemicals. Surrounding the planet's atmosphere and extending thousands of kilometers into space is a mysterious ultraviolet sheen known as "electroglow." Approximately 8,000 km (5,000 mi) below Uranus' cloud tops, there is thought to be a scalding ocean of water and dissolved ammonia some 10,000 km (6,200 mi) deep. Beneath this ocean is an Earth-sized core of heavier materials.

Voyager 2 discovered 10 new moons, 16-169 km (10-105 mi) in diameter, orbiting Uranus. The five previously known -- Miranda, Ariel, Umbriel, Titania, and Oberon -- range in size from 520 to 1,610 km (323 to 1,000 mi) across. Representing a geological showcase, these five moons are half-ice, half-rock spheres that are cold and dark and show evidence of past activity, including faulting and ice flows.

The most remarkable of Uranus' moons is Miranda. Its surface features high cliffs as well as canyons, crater-pocked plains, and winding valleys. The sharp variations in terrain suggest that, after the moon formed, it was smashed apart by a collision with another body -- an event not unusual in our solar system, which contains many objects that have impact craters or are fragments from large impacts. What is extraordinary is that Miranda apparently reformed with some of the material that had been in its interior exposed on its surface.

Uranus was thought to have nine dark rings; Voyager 2 imaged 11. In contrast to Saturn's rings, composed of bright particles, Uranus' rings are primarily made up of dark, boulder-sized chunks.

Neptune

Voyager 2 completed its 12-year tour of the solar system with an investigation of Neptune and the planet's moons. On Aug 25, 1989, the spacecraft swept to within 4,850 km (3,010 mi) of Neptune and then flew on to the moon Triton. During the Neptune encounter, it became clear that the planet's atmosphere was more active than Uranus'.

Voyager 2 observed the Great Dark Spot, a circular storm the size of Earth, in Neptune's atmosphere. Resembling Jupiter's Great Red Spot, the storm spins counter-clockwise and moves westward at almost 1,200 km (745 mi) per hour. Voyager 2 also noted a smaller dark spot and a fast-moving cloud dubbed the "Scooter," as well as high-altitude clouds over the main hydrogen and helium cloud deck. The highest wind speeds of any planet were observed, up to 2,400 km (1,500 mi) per hour.

The Solar System

Like the other giant planets, Neptune has a gaseous hydrogen and helium upper layer over a liquid interior. The planet's core contains a higher percentage of rock and metal than those of the other gas giants. Neptune's distinctive blue appearance, like Uranus' blue color, is due to atmospheric methane.

Neptune's magnetic field is tilted relative to the planet's spin axis and is not centered at the core. This phenomenon is similar to Uranus' magnetic field and suggests that the field of the two giants are being generated in an area above the cores, where the pressure is so great that liquid hydrogen assumes the electrical properties of a metal. Earth's magnetic field, on the other hand, is produced by its spinning metallic core and is only slightly tilted and offset relative to its center.

Voyager 2 also shed light on the mystery of Neptune's rings. Observations from Earth indicated that there were arcs of material in orbit around the giant planet. It was not clear how Neptune could have arcs and how these could be kept from spreading out into even, unclumped rings. Voyager 2 detected these arcs, but they were, in fact, part of thin, complete rings. A number of small moons could explain the arcs, but such bodies were not spotted.

Astronomers had identified the Neptunian moons Triton in 1846 and Nereid in 1949. Voyager 2 found six more. One of the new moons -- Proteus -- is actually larger than Nereid, but since Proteus orbits close to Neptune, it was lost in the planet's glare for observers on Earth.

Triton circles Neptune in a retrograde orbit in under 6 days. Tidal forces on Triton are causing it to spiral slowly toward the planet. In 10-100 million years (a short time in astronomical terms), the moon will be so close that Neptunian gravity will tear it apart, forming a spectacular ring to accompany the planet's modest current rings.

Triton's landscape is as strange and unexpected as those of Io and Miranda. The moon has more rock than its counterparts at Saturn and Uranus. Triton's mantle is probably composed of water-ice, but its crust is a thin veneer of nitrogen and methane. The moon shows two dramatically different types of terrain: the so-called "cantaloupe" terrain and a receding ice cap.

Dark streaks appear on the ice cap. These streaks are the fallout from geyser-like volcanic vents that shoot nitrogen gas and dark, fine-grained particles to heights of 1-8 km (1-5 mi). Triton's thin atmosphere, only 1/70,000th as thick as Earth's, has winds that carry the dark particles and deposit them as streaks on the ice cap -- the coldest surface yet discovered in the solar system (-235 degrees Celsius, -391 degrees Fahrenheit). Triton might be more like Pluto than any other object spacecraft have so far visited.

Pluto

Pluto is the most distant of the planets, yet the eccentricity of its orbit periodically carries it inside Neptune's orbit, where it has been since 1979 and where it will remain until March 1999. Pluto's orbit is also highly inclined -- tilted 17 degrees to the orbital plane of the other planets.

Discovered in 1930, Pluto appears to be little more than a celestial snowball. The planet's diameter is calculated to be approximately 2,300 km (1,430 mi), only 2/3 the size of our Moon. Ground-based observations indicate that Pluto's surface is covered with methane ice and that there is a thin atmosphere that may freeze and fall to the surface as the planet moves away from the Sun. Observations also show that Pluto's spin axis is tipped by 122 degrees.

The planet has one known satellite, Charon, discovered in 1978. Charon's surface composition is different from Pluto's: the moon appears to be covered with water-ice rather than methane ice. Its orbit is gravitationally locked with Pluto, so both bodies always keep the same hemisphere facing each other. Pluto's and Charon's rotational period and Charon's period of revolution are all 6.4 Earth days.

No spacecraft has ever visited Pluto, however, a Pluto Fast Flyby mission is being studied for a possible launch in 1999-2000.

The Solar System

Comets

The outermost members of the solar system occasionally pay a visit to the inner planets. As asteroids are the rocky and metallic remnants of the formation of the solar system, comets are the icy debris from that dim beginning and can survive only far from the Sun. Most comet nuclei reside in the Oort Cloud, a loose swarm of objects in a halo beyond the planets and reaching perhaps halfway to the nearest star.

Comet nuclei orbit in this frozen abyss until they are gravitationally perturbed into new orbits that carry them close to the Sun. As a nucleus falls inside the orbits of the outer planets, the volatile elements of which it is made gradually warm; by the time the nucleus enters the region of the inner planets, these volatile elements are boiling. The nucleus itself is irregular and only a few miles across, and is made principally of water-ice with methane and ammonia.

As these materials boil off of the nucleus, they form a coma or cloud-like "head" that can measure tens of thousands of kilometers across. The coma grows as the comet gets closer to the Sun. The stream of charged particles coming from the Sun pushes on this cloud, blowing it back and giving rise to the comet's "tails." Gases and ions are blown directly back from the nucleus, but dust particles are pushed more slowly. As the nucleus continues in its orbit, the dust particles are left behind in a curved arc.

Both the gas and dust tails point away from the Sun; in effect, the comet chases its tails as it recedes from the Sun. The tails can reach 150 million km (93 million mi) in length, but the total amount of material contained in this dramatic display would fit in an ordinary suitcase. Comets -- from the Latin *cometa*, meaning "long-haired" -- are essentially dramatic light shows.

Some comets pass through the solar system only once, but others have their orbits gravitationally modified by a close encounter with one of the giant outer planets. These latter visitors can enter closed elliptical orbits and repeatedly return to the inner solar system.

Halley's Comet is the most famous example of a relatively short period comet, returning on an average of once every 76 years and orbiting from beyond Neptune to within Venus' orbit. Confirmed sightings of the comet go back to 240 B.C. This regular visitor to our solar system is named for Sir Edmund Halley, because he plotted the comet's orbit and predicted its return, based on earlier sightings and Newtonian laws of motion. His name became part of astronomical lore when, in 1759, the comet returned on schedule. Unfortunately, Sir Edmund did not live to see it.

A comet can be very prominent in the sky if it passes comparatively close to Earth. Unfortunately, on its most recent appearance, Halley's Comet passed no closer than 62.4 million km (28.8 million mi) from our world. The comet was visible to the naked eye, especially for viewers in the southern hemisphere, but it was not spectacular. Comets have been so bright, on rare occasions, that they were visible during daytime. Historically, comet sightings have been interpreted as bad omens and have been artistically rendered as daggers in the sky.

Several spacecraft have flown by comets at high speed; the first was NASA's International Cometary Explorer in 1985. An armada of five spacecraft (two Japanese, two Soviet, and the Giotto spacecraft from the European Space Agency) flew by Halley's Comet in 1986.