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## Australians Take Mir Deorbit Risks in Stride

By [Stewart Taggart](#)

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ESPERANCE, Western Australia -- John Coates, manager of emergency services in this isolated fishing and tourism town doesn't want to know about [Mir](#).

He doesn't plan to pay attention to the space stations looming crash unless regional authorities in Kalgoorlie or Perth instruct him to do so. That's because Coates was around [when Americas Skylab fell on his hometown](#) in July 1979. One close encounter with [space junk](#) is enough for him.

"Esperance is a lot more populated area now than it was then," Coates said. "That's why I hope they don't call."

At this point, emergency management officials in both Australia and New Zealand appear to be accepting estimates that Mir has a less than three percent chance of hitting land when it crashes to Earth on Friday. On that day, Mir will be targeted at a huge and lonely ocean area between New Zealand and Chile and Australia and New Zealand appear comfortable with this.

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As such, emergency management officials aren't urging antipodeans to take any special precautions and that's why Coates' phone isn't ringing.

In New Zealand, the primary official action thus far has been to warn ships at sea to avoid the splashdown area, says Patrick Helm, chairman of the country's ad hoc Satellite Re-Entry Committee. In Australia, Brian Flanagan, spokesman for Emergency Management Australia, can't stress enough that the risk of anything hitting Australia is "very low."

Perhaps taking its cue from officialdom, the public also appears to be taking the risk in stride.

For instance, periodic stories in local newspapers have chronicled what the final days of Mir may be like, but under tongue-in-cheek headlines like: "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do." With the feverish final days of summer just ahead in the antipodes, and all those outdoor activities to cram in before the weather turns cold, who's got time to worry about Mir?

Without a doubt, [Mirs re-entry](#) is likely to be the biggest fireworks show thus far of the 21st Century. What to expect? Well, if the show put on by the American space station Skylab when it fell to Earth in July 1979 is anything to go by -- Mir's final plunge should be pretty spectacular, says Dorothy Andre, a long-time resident of Esperance, who was around when Skylab fell.

"It was cloudy that night, but the clouds cleared when it came through," she told Space.com by telephone. "As it came through the atmosphere, it broke the sound barrier with sonic booms, one after the other, rattling windows we thought it was the end of the world."

Even though debris fell over the area at high speeds, no injuries were reported, not even of cattle kept outdoors. In the days and weeks that followed, bits of foam and insulation and other non-metallic objects floated ashore from parts of Skylab that crashed into the sea, she said.

Andre and her husband Mervin operate the Esperance Municipal Museum. In the months following Skylab's crash, they collected roughly two dozen pieces of the space station to put on display. These vary from a series of spherical containers to a huge oxygen tank the size of a Volkswagen van that weighs well over a tonne. Another specimen is a 45-kilo door hatch.

Given that nothing much happens in Esperance, she and her husband have since nicknamed their tourist stop "The Skylab Museum of Australia," which she says gets about 12,000 visitors a year.

At the time of Skylab's crash to Earth, her husband Mervin also was president of Esperance shire. He issued the Americans a ticket for littering, a fine which to this day remains unpaid. Others who achieved notoriety from Skylab's fall was 17-year-old local boy Stan Thornton. He scooped a few pieces of Skylab off the roof of his home and caught the first flight to San Francisco, where he collected a \$10,000 prize from the San Francisco Examiner.

For Coates, however, all that excitement was well and good. But he's hoping lightning won't strike the same place twice.

On the morning of July 12, just after midnight, he and other local emergency services personnel were standing in front of their local headquarters completely unaware of what to expect, and very nervous. Then, suddenly, Skylab came down, and the view from where he stood was fantastic.

"As it went overhead, it was a terrific flame like a burning plane, with all these little pieces shearing off," he said.

Sonic booms rattled the town.

"It was great, and Mir should be the same," he said. "And as long as it doesn't happen here, I'll be happy."

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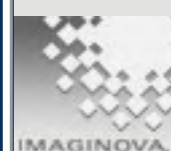
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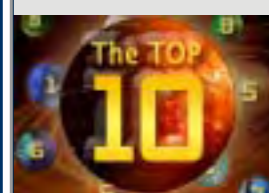
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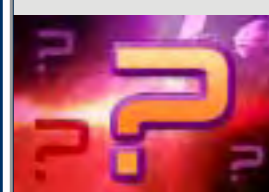
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