Apollo 17 safely landed on the moon on December 11, 1972, after launching from Earth four days prior. The 11th and final mission of the United States' Apollo program, and the sixth NASA mission to put men on the moon, Apollo 17 was also the program’s only night launch, taking off just after midnight.

It was the first in its program to suffer an extraterrestrial “fender bender” when one of the rover’s bumpers was accidentally ripped by a hammer while on the lunar surface. The crew used a plastic map to make the needed repairs (see NASA photo below).

Apollo 17’s three-member crew consisted of Commander Eugene Cernan, Command Module Pilot Ronald Evans, and Lunar Module Pilot Harrison Schmitt.

Evans remained in orbit while Cernan and Schmitt spent three days on the lunar surface conducting extra-vehicular activity (moonwalks), during which they collected lunar samples and deployed scientific instruments.

Schmitt’s participation in the lunar mission was in itself noteworthy for NASA, as he was a geologist and the first scientist NASA sent to the moon. In the NASA photo below, Schmitt is seen next to a huge split boulder on the lunar surface.
As this was to be the last Apollo moon landing, special consideration was given to the landing and exploration sites. The decision was made to land in the Taurus-Littrow valley with the primary objectives for Apollo 17 in mind: to sample lunar highland material older than the impact that formed Mare Imbrium and investigate the possibility of relatively young volcanic activity in the same vicinity.

Taurus-Littrow was selected because it offered the possibility of finding highland material in the valley's north and south walls. The site also showed the possibility that several craters in the valley surrounded by dark material could be linked to volcanic activity.

Apollo 17 was the first and only lunar landing mission to carry the "traverse gravimeter experiment" (TGE), built by Draper Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and designed to provide relative gravity measurements throughout the landing site at various locations during the mission's moonwalks. The 26 measurements taken with the TGE during the mission's three moonwalks provided scientists data about the geological substructure of the landing site and the surrounding vicinity.

Cernan, Evans, and Schmitt returned to Earth on December 19 after approximately 12 days. Apollo 17 broke several records set by previous flights, including the longest manned lunar landing flight, the longest total lunar surface extravehicular activities, the largest lunar sample return, and the longest time in lunar orbit.

After Apollo 17, extra Apollo spacecraft were used in the Skylab and Apollo-Soyuz Test Project programs. NASA offered this video review of the mission on its 40 year anniversary (December 11, 2012).
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Editor's note: This article was originally posted on December 11, 2012 and edited on December 11, 2018.