

Dark Sky

The desire

to find and lose ourselves in the stars is ancient. Like so many other inhabitants of this planet over the eons, we use the stars to navigate far away and to find our way back home. While that “way” for humans can also be metaphorical, the stars themselves remain very real—when we can see them, that is. For urbanites and rural dwellers alike, there endures a need to occasionally look up and experience the astonishing lights of the universe. Satisfying that need and sharing it with others, though, must often wait until there is time to find such places—during vacations, retreats, and getaways. But there are also a growing number of planned dark sky communities that are trying to answer that need, as well.

What follows is a partial list of places of bewilderment to visit, vacation, or even call home.

Destinations:

New Dimensions in Tourism

OBSERVATORIES

Visiting an observatory offers one of the best opportunities to view a dark sky. And with just over 500 professional astronomical observatories in 53 countries worldwide, nearly half of them in the United States, it might not be a very long trip. In the United States, Arizona has more observatories than any other state or country, 32; California is second with 23; New Zealand has 24 and Australia has 22; Chile and Spain each have 19. A popular vacation destination, Hawaii, has 16; New York has 15, as does Italy. Germany has 12; Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and France have 11; and the United Kingdom rounds out this partial list with 10.

A few of the most popular observatories to visit include:

Arizona: Kitt Peak National Observatory, 56 miles southwest of Tucson, is high above the Sonoran Desert on the Tohono O'odham Reservation and has a Nightly Observing Program. Lowell Observatory, one mile west of Flagstaff, has telescope viewing in the evenings.

California: Mt. Palomar Observatory, 60 miles northeast of San Diego, has daytime tours but is a research facility and does not accommodate nighttime viewing.

Hawaii: W.M. Keck Observatory, on the 14,000-foot summit of Mauna Kea, has a visitor center at its 9,200-foot base camp that provides free stargazing programs.

New Mexico: The Very Large Array is 50 miles west of Socorro and has a visitor center, gift shop, and guided tours.

Texas: McDonald Observatory, 185 miles south of El Paso on Mt. Locke, offers star parties, tours, and a visitor center.

West Virginia: National Radio Astronomy Observatory, 53 miles south of Elkins in Green Bank, offers star parties and tours.

Puerto Rico: The National Astronomy and Ionosphere Center Arecibo Observatory offers a visitor center with exhibits and an audio-visual show.

Australia: Siding Spring Observatory in Warrumbungle National Park, Coonabarabran, New South Wales; includes a visitor center.

Chile: The Paranal Site of the ESO La Silla Paranal Observatory offers a limited number of tours.

Scotland: Royal Observatory Edinburgh offers group visits, observing evenings, and public talks.

South Africa: The South African Astronomical Observatory in Sutherland offers day and night tours.

UK: Jodrell Bank Observatory/Lovell Radio Telescope, at the University of Manchester, has a 3D theater, exhibits, arboretum, café and shop, and scheduled events.

CRUISES

In the United States, Michigan's Traverse Tall Ship Company offers a Windjammer Astronomy Cruise of Michigan and Huron Lakes.

Internationally, Eye on the Sky® AstroCruises astronomy programs are found aboard Celebrity, Clipper, Cruise West, Crystal, Cunard, Hapag-Lloyd, Holland America, Oceania, Orient Lines, ResidenSea, Royal Caribbean, Seabourn, Silversea, Travel Dynamics International (Classical Cruises), and Windjammer Barefoot cruise ships.

UNITED STATES

State Park

The National Public Observatory's Stars-n-Parks program helps to "preserve and utilize dark sky enclaves around the country." It offers regularly scheduled astronomy education programs and stargazing events in state parks in Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and New York. Other state parks offer dark sky programs, as well. Among those we found:

Pennsylvania—Cherry Springs State Park, Heart's Content National Forest Service Scenic Area, and Rickett's Glen State Park.

RÉSERVE INTERNATIONALE DE CIEL ÉTOILÉ DU MONT-MÉGANTIC

INTERNATIONAL DARK SKY RESERVE

Poster from the IDA Fall meeting
Image courtesy of ASTROLab du
Mont-Mégantic

Poster courtesy of ASTROLab du Mont-Mégantic



Certifiée par International Dark-sky Association (IDA)

New Mexico—Leasburg Dam State Park, City of the Rocks State Park, Elephant Butte State Park, Rockhound State Park, Pancho Villa State Park, Caballo Lake State Park, Oliver Lee Memorial State Park, and Lake State Park.

New York—Long Point State Park, Lake Erie State Park, and Chatauqua County Parks Department, Luensman Overlook.

Additionally, the Potowatomi Wildlife Park in Indiana is managed as a dark sky preserve; Michigan has Lake Hudson State Park Dark Sky Preserve; and Ohio has Conkles Hollow Dark Sky Site in Hocking Hills State Park

National Parks

Utah's Natural Bridges National Monument, recently awarded IDA's first **International Dark Sky Park** designation [see page 12], is the only Bortle Class 2 (typically truly dark site) designation in the United States. West of Natural Bridges is Bryce Canyon National Park, which offers star parties.

Other national parks offering memorable dark skies:

Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park; **California's** Joshua Tree National Park, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park, Mt. Diablo at John Muir National Historic Site, Death Valley, Lassen Volcanic National Park, and Yosemite National Park; and **New Mexico's** Chaco Culture National Historical Park, which offers the Chaco Night Sky Program.

Travel Guides

Night Sky Adventures offers interpretive astronomy tours in state and national parks throughout New Mexico.

Inns

New Mexico's Star Hill Inn says it was the country's first guest inn to combine comfortable accommodations and a location that showcases the wonders of the night sky.

FishUn Time Resort on Bull Shoals Lake in the Arkansas Ozarks says, "We have Dark Sky!"

New Mexico Skies, 38 miles east of Alamogordo, offers guest accommodations and the ability to remotely view and image celestial objects using state of the art robotic telescopes.

Communities

Flagstaff, Arizona, became IDA's first **International Dark Sky Community** in 2001 [see page 12]. It passed the world's first light ordinances banning advertising search lights in 1958,

has an annual five-week series of dark sky events, and offers a program to help businesses upgrade obsolete lighting,

The dark sky residential community of Arizona Sky Village in Portal, Arizona, is "dedicated to the preservation of dark skies." It has established significant lighting restrictions and architectural review. A community center, a community observatory, and rental telescopes are among planned on-site amenities.

Tonopah, Nevada, 200 miles northwest of Las Vegas, boasts that "the only bright lights you see around Tonopah are the stars."

The sustainably planned community of Harmony, Florida, is designed to balance the ecology between humans and native wildlife and is dedicated to dark sky compliant streetlights throughout its properties.

Deerlick Astronomy Village in Sharon, Georgia, is "a unique planned community catering to the specific needs of amateur and professional astronomers." The area is 96-acres of rural sky (Bortle Class 3) planned with an observing site, two wildlife preserves, and thirty home sites.

Florida's Chiefland Astronomy Village is an observing/camping site along the Gulf Shore, south of Tallahassee.

CANADA

Parks,

Québec's Mont-Mégantic National Park and ASTROLab are in the heart of IDA's newly designated **International Dark Sky Reserve** [see page 12]. The IDSR encompasses an area of 5,500 km², including the counties of Granit and Haut-Saint-François and the City of Sherbrooke.

Other dark sky parks include the Dark Sky Preserve of Cypress Hills Inter-provincial Park in Saskatchewan and Alberta; McDonald Park Dark Sky Preserve in Fraser Valley in British Columbia; Wapusk National Park in Manitoba; and eight parks in Ontario—Beaver Hills Dark Sky Preserve, Elk Island National Park, Torrance Barrens Dark Sky Reserve, Gordon's Park Wilderness Retreat and Interpretive Center, Echo Valley Observatory, Haliburton Forest and Wild Life Reserve, Northern Bruce Peninsula, and Point Pelee National Park and Dark Sky Preserve.

CHILE

Hotel Elqui Domos is an astronomic hotel located in the Elqui Valley, near La Serena and Cerro Mamalluca Observatory. The unique facility consists of seven geodesic dome rooms, each with a telescope and an elevated bed situated beneath a detachable roof. Horseback rides under the stars and lessons in using a telescope are also available

SCOTLAND

Dark Sky Scotland is a national program supporting public and educational astronomy events. It is run by Edinburgh's Royal Observatory and has events scheduled through the spring of 2008. Scotland has some of the darkest skies in Western Europe. Visit www.darkskyscotland.org.uk.

IRELAND

Ireland's West Coast also displays some of the darkest skies in Europe. Connemara, The Burren, West Cork, and West Kerry are popular viewing choices for Irish astronomers. For a special dark skies break, Valentia Island, one of Europe's most westerly inhabited locations, is an ideal choice. Visit www.discoverireland.ie.

SPAIN

La Palma is home to the Roque de los Muchachos Astrophysics Observatory, which is not generally open to the public. But with little urban development or artificial light pollution, the island is a prime astronomical viewing destination. Visit www.lapalmaturismo.com.

PORTUGAL

COAA, The Algarve Center for Astronomical Observation, is in southern Portugal. Well known as an astronomy holiday center, amateur astronomers have the use of larger telescopes

and expert assistance. Beaches, water sports, a bird sanctuary, and more are nearby. Visit www.coaa.co.uk.

MONGOLIA

"Stars of the Mongolian Sky," available through Bogd Tour, includes dinner and a star party at the Khurel Togoot Astronomical Observatory. The observatory is located on the sacred Bogd Khan Mountain, which according to UNESCO, is the world's oldest officially protected area (1778).

AUSTRALIA

Wiruna is New South Wales' premier dark sky site. Located near Ilford, three hours northwest of Sydney, it is 107-acres, containing two separate viewing areas and five telescopes. Wiruna's 16th Annual South Pacific Star Party will be April 4–6.

NEW ZEALAND

Lake Tekapo and Mount John Observatory, in the Mackenzie District, South Island, are situated at one of the world's best astronomical viewing locations. UNESCO is considering designating the village of Lake Tekapo as its first World Heritage Starlight Reserve during the International Year of Astronomy in 2009.

SOUTH AFRICA

Kruger National Park offers stargazing activities, including African star lore and night viewing with most of its tour packages.

The South African Astronomical Observatory, in Sutherland, offers day and night tours. While none of the research telescopes are available for public view, the visitor center has two dedicated telescopes.

SanPedro de Atacama, the primary base of QuasarChile operations in the Atacama region of Northern Chile. To learn more about QuasarChile tours visit their Web site www.quasarchile.cl



Photograph courtesy of QuasarChile