

Starry Starry night

A slice of the sky for those who care for an astronomical adventure; for a divine holiday, delve into the world of sky travel.

Text **Lucy Corne**

People travel in search of many different things – original foods, unusual landscapes, new cultures – but in an increasingly polluted world, some travellers are now globetrotting to seek out something else: clear skies. Just as many people travel to follow football teams or animal migrations, some tourists are using the night sky to help them decide where to travel next. I don't mean that they're reading the stars to predict their next journey – they choose their next destination depending on which place in the world offers the brightest stars, the best meteor showers or the clearest view of the Aurora Borealis. And since 2009 has been declared the International Year of Astronomy, there hasn't been a better time to join in with these star-crazy travellers. Here's a rundown on some of the world's top spots for sky travel.



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North America

Canada and the US both boast huge expanses of nothingness and there are few places on the continent with fewer people and less pollution than Fairbanks, Alaska. Of course, the most famous phenomenon happening in Fairbanks' skies is the appearance of the Aurora Borealis. And during the season, you can't stay in the city for long without hearing about the lights; radio stations, newspapers and websites keep you up to date with the northern lights forecast, shops stock up on multi-colour merchandise and everyone in the tourism industry tries to cash in on the incredible spectacle. See the lights from a dog sled, a horse-drawn sleigh, a hot air balloon, a boat, a heated 'aurorium' or if you're trying to save cash, just on foot.

The lights are notoriously tough to guarantee though, so try not to be too disappointed if you don't get a glimpse. Naturally, if the skies are clear enough to witness the dancing lights of the Aurora Borealis, this is also going to be a top spot for standard stargazing, so if you're unlucky with the lights, take solace in Orion's Belt, Canis Major and a Milky Way so clear it looks like it's been painted on.



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South America

If you're going to seek out superlative stargazing venues, then you might as well aim for the top. Vicuña, in central Chile is largely reputed to have the clearest sky in the world and there's no better place to put this to the test than at the Mamalluca Observatory. It's not the largest in the region, but the more important Cerro Tololo caters to professional astronomers rather than travelling novices.

Mamalluca is closer to Vicuña, easier to reach and offers cheap, regular tours to anyone who's interested. The Basic Astronomy Tour begins with a short lecture and ends with a session peering through 30 cm telescopes. For a visit that combines culture with constellations, the Andean Cosmovision tour is perfect. Learn how the stars have influenced local folklore, spend some time with the telescopes and finish off with a traditional music and dance show.

Europe

You might not associate densely populated Europe with particularly clear skies, but if you're keen to wander off the beaten path then a pleasant surprise awaits. When you look at a world map, La Palma doesn't look like a part of Europe, lying 250 km off the Moroccan coast, but where red tape is concerned, the Canary Islands are unquestionably part of Spain. Sitting at the top of the 2,400m high island is the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory, boasting the largest optical telescope in world.



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The giant telescopes are only open to the public for a few days each summer, but you can get up close to photograph the space age architecture and stunning backdrop anytime during daylight hours. While you're here, don't forget to admire the breathtaking views into the vast Caldera de Taburiente, an erosion crater that dominates the centre of the island. Nearby towns use special street lights to reduce glare, so you can admire the crystal clear blanket of stars from various points on the island. Stay in Los Llanos de Ariadne for boutique accommodation, original tapas menus and some of the clearest skies in all of Europe.

Africa

On such a vast continent that's still blissfully rural, there are scores of places offering pitch-black skies awash with stars. You'd think it would be difficult to single out one perfect place for a spot of sky travel, but astronomy experts from across the globe have done the hard work for you when they chose South Africa for the southern hemisphere's largest optical telescope. Sutherland is a one-street town 100 km from anywhere and surrounded on all sides by impressive expanses of nothing. Only three things bring people this far

off the beaten track – the cold (Sutherland is the chilliest town in South Africa), the lamb or the giant telescope and blanket of stars so thick you can barely see the jet black night sky.

Most drive here for the latter and are rewarded with daytime tours around SALT (Southern African Large Telescope) and night-time visits offering a guided 'sky tour' with a smaller but still impressive telescope. Dress warm, huddle together and enjoy a tutored tour that often ends with an unforgettable finale – peering through the lens to clearly make out Saturn's rings.

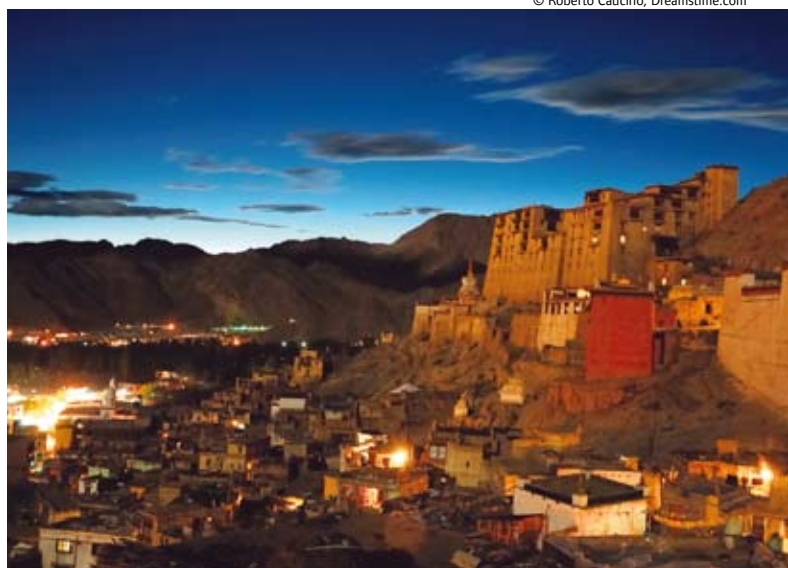
Asia

Asia gets a bad rep when it comes to clear skies. Many people would scoff at the idea of seeing a ceiling of stars anywhere on the continent. But what people seem to forget is that this is not solely a continent of megacities and smog – it's also the continent that is home to the world's highest mountain range. Of course, most of us will never make it to the peak of Everest, but there are plenty of other mountainous spots for engaging in some amateur astronomy.

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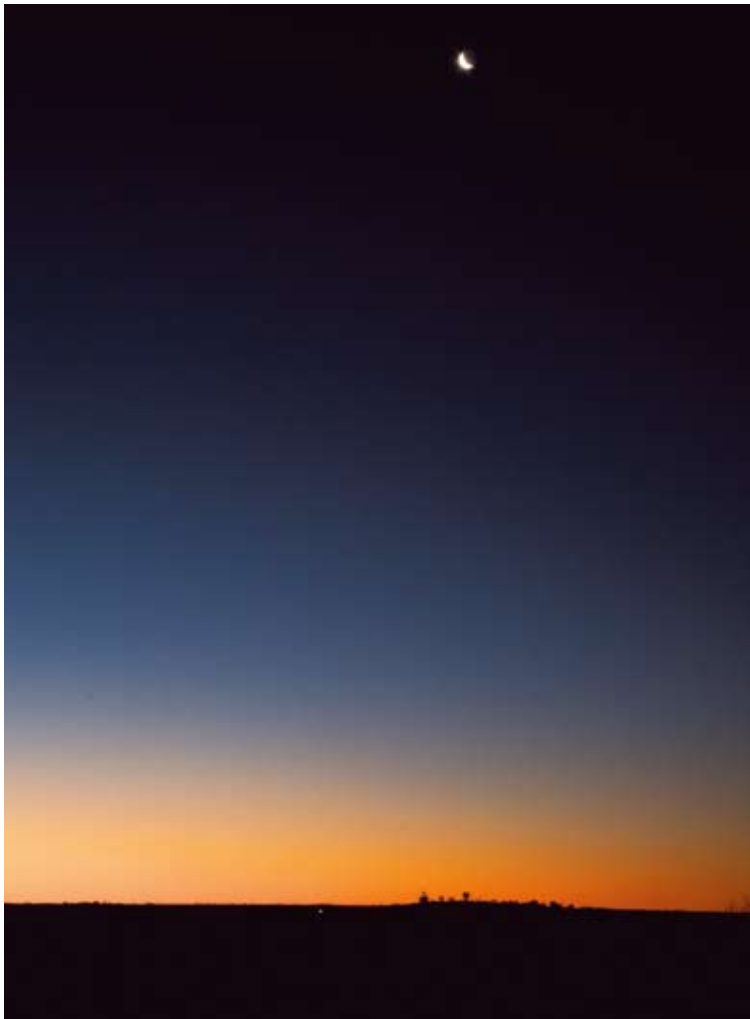
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Ladakh in northern India is renowned for its clear night skies, aided by low humidity, high altitude and an absence of too much artificial light. Wander from the larger town of Leh, opting instead for rural villages away from the crowds. If you can cope with the altitude, joining a trek into the mountains will guarantee unhindered night-time views. Those who seek something a little less strenuous should opt for a permit to visit the Nubra Valley. The pristine landscape and low population make for perfect sky travel conditions.

Australasia

If you're looking for a sky travel adventure that's au naturel, then Australia is bound to deliver. Uluru (also known as Ayers



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Rock) sits under some of the purest sky on the continent, lying over 400 km from the closest sizeable town (and even Alice Springs has a population of just 30,000). You could easily enjoy the night sky unassisted, but if you care to know more about what you're looking at, join a stargazing evening at the Ayers Rock Resort. Start with champagne and canapés, followed by folklore as the sun sets and the stars emerge.

Professional astronomers are on hand to answer tricky questions and give you some insight into which star is which. Or if you fancy something a little less structured, check in to the camp site, take your Therm-a-Rest outside and just enjoy the view. And if you're an early to bed, early to rise type of traveller who can't stay up for celestial activity, you can still enjoy awe-inspiring sunsets and sunrises – some of the most impressive on the planet.

Plan your sky travel adventure

Your sky travel experience will vary depending on where you're heading. Some places offer organised tours, others take a more relaxed, DIY approach.

In **Fairbanks**, you'll find no lack of Aurora tours, especially during the season (November to March). The Aurora Borealis Lodge (www.auroracabin.com) offers guided or self-drive tours with an all-important hot beverage. Chena Hot Springs (www.chenahotspotsprings.com) offer some quirky Aurora-viewing options, including tutored sky gazing trips in their snow coach.

The Mamalluca Observatory in **Vicuña** (www.mamalluca.org) is really well set up for tourists and offers two tours, both costing \$7. They'll also provide transport from the office in Vicuña to the observatory, 10 km away. The tours start from scratch and include a brief lecture before heading out to peer through the telescopes.

There are no structured tours to the observatory at **Roque de los Muchachos**. By day you can drive up to the top of the island at your leisure and photograph the observatory, though you can't go inside. If you're keen to take a tour, contact the tourist information office to find out when it's open to the public: www.lapalmaturismo.com.

Trips to **Sutherland** are easy to arrange and perhaps offer the most comprehensive sky-travel experience. Tours must be booked in advance (www.sao.ac.za). There are two options. You can actually enter the enormous telescope, but only during the day; if you want to join an evening stargazing tour you'll be using slightly smaller equipment. Tours begin with a short talk and then you spend two hours outside, learning about the stars with a trained astronomer. Bring warm clothes – it gets really cold and you'll be standing around not doing much! Evening tours generally start at 8 pm and cost \$6.

In **Ladakh**, sky travel is more laid-back. Any Leh-based tour company will offer camping trips, offering unhindered views of the night sky, though not all guides will be knowledgeable astronomers. If you want to know what you're gazing at, grab a star chart before you set off. Alternatively, you could stay at Mantra Cottages (www.mantracottages.com) in the outskirts of Leh – they have professional stargazing equipment available for guests.

At **Uluru** you can choose between enjoying the stars and silence alone, or joining a tutored stargazing evening at Ayers Rock Resort (www.ayersrockresort.com.au). They don't have any fancy equipment but the staff is knowledgeable and will inform you of the official constellation names as well as a few local legends.

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