

A NIGHT WITH THE STARS

Whether you're camping in the outback or just walking out the back of a Blue Mountains hotel, there are many ways to see our night sky in all its glory.

WORDS CATHERINE PELOSI

The further away you get
from light pollution the better
for seeing our universe.

BEING TUCKED AWAY at the bottom of the globe has its advantages. For star gazing enthusiasts, the southern hemisphere is a treasure trove, especially in winter when we can enjoy brighter views of the Milky Way and beauties like the Jewel Box star cluster and Australia's best-known constellation of the Southern Cross.

However, Australia's prime position is only half of the equation. For the ultimate galactic experience, dark and open skies create the best conditions. Light emissions from buildings and streetlights can create a disruptive 'glow' that's hard to avoid when living in the city. So where are the best places to peer into the universe?

OUTBACK ASTRONOMY

Perhaps better known for its history of mining, the heritage town of Broken Hill offers the perfect location for exploring high above the

earth's surface as well. Outback Astronomy is a night sky observation area and tour, which is located 300km from any substantial city lighting in every direction.

Linda Nadge, Outback Astronomy owner and guide, says, "Outback Astronomy's viewing site has no light pollution and the smoky, hazy band of the Milky Way galaxy is simply amazing on cloud-free nights. We can still see all the key naked eye celestial objects that Hipparchus and Ptolemy documented several thousand years ago."

Guests can recline in chairs and locate the many wonders of the sky with the naked eye and with binoculars. There are weekly guided shows suitable for anyone from beginners to experts. Personal audio devices are also available for those on the tour and ensure nothing is missed.

CSIRO PARKES OBSERVATORY

For more than 50 years, the CSIRO radio telescope (more commonly known as 'the dish') has received signals from space, tracked spacecraft and, most famously, received live televised images of the Apollo 11 moon mission.

There's plenty to do at the observatory. A highlight is visiting the dedicated viewing area to watch the dish move, which astronomers exploring the universe control.

The location of the iconic Australian telescope is not by chance - Parkes is one of the nation's best spots for star gazing. While there's no official star gazing tour offered at the CSIRO Parkes Observatory, you're bound to find clear views in the town. Central West Astronomical Society also hosts observation nights open to all (more information at cwass.org.au).

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BLUE MOUNTAINS OBSERVATORY

The Blue Mountains Observatory is surrounded by bushland, far away from light pollution. It also sits at an altitude of 1000 metres, giving it a similar sky viewpoint to that in the Australian outback.

The added bonus of this experience is that visitors can stay on-site. The resident astronomer meets guests and takes them to the observatory, which is right behind the cottage-style accommodation. After a guided tour and viewing session through

Credits: Getty Images

There you might see the gas bands on Jupiter and the rings of Saturn with a small telescope

a robotic telescope, guests can walk back to their beds. The observatory is also home to astronomy research and state-of-the-art equipment that can take galactic images.

MOUNT STROMLO OBSERVATORY

Running since 1924, Mount Stromlo Observatory in the ACT is another gem. It has a stable atmosphere (which creates clear images and views) and low light pollution. During winter, the planets of our solar system are on the must-see list and you might see the gas bands on Jupiter and the rings of Saturn with a small telescope. The observatory is open to the public, with regular tours and talks on offer, including viewing opportunities through the telescopes.

Dark matter and dark energy make up about 95 per cent of everything in the universe and scientists from Mount Stromlo discovered both. Professor Brian Schmidt won a Nobel Prize for leading the team that showed dark energy exists in our universe. And Professor Ken Freeman, an astronomer, was a key player in discovering dark matter.

Mount Stromlo owns a second site - Siding Spring Observatory. It sits on the edge of the Warrumbungle National Park in Central NSW and is also open to the public until 4pm daily.

Mount Stromlo Observatory is open to the public and holds free star gazing nights.



MORE INFORMATION



OUTBACK ASTRONOMY

18817 Barrier Highway, Broken Hill, NSW
Choose from a range of shows including 'Moon Feature', 'Milky Way Overview' and many more. Pricing is between \$25 for children and \$55 for adults.

outbackastronomy.com.au

How to get there: It's a 5.5km drive from the city centre of Broken Hill.

CSIRO PARKES OBSERVATORY

585 Telescope Road, Parkes, NSW
The CSIRO visitor centre is open daily from 8.30am to 4.15pm (except Christmas Day and Boxing Day). Entry to the visitor centre, telescope viewing area and astronomy and space science exhibition is free.

csiro.au

How to get there: It's a 20km drive north of Parkes off the Newell Highway (the main highway linking Brisbane and Melbourne that crosses central NSW).

BLUE MOUNTAINS OBSERVATORY

94 Rawson Parade, Leura, NSW
Astronomy tours are currently only available to those hiring the cottage (sleeps up to seven). Cottage prices start at \$205 per night. Astronomy tours cost \$350 for the group.

bluemountainsobservatory.com.au

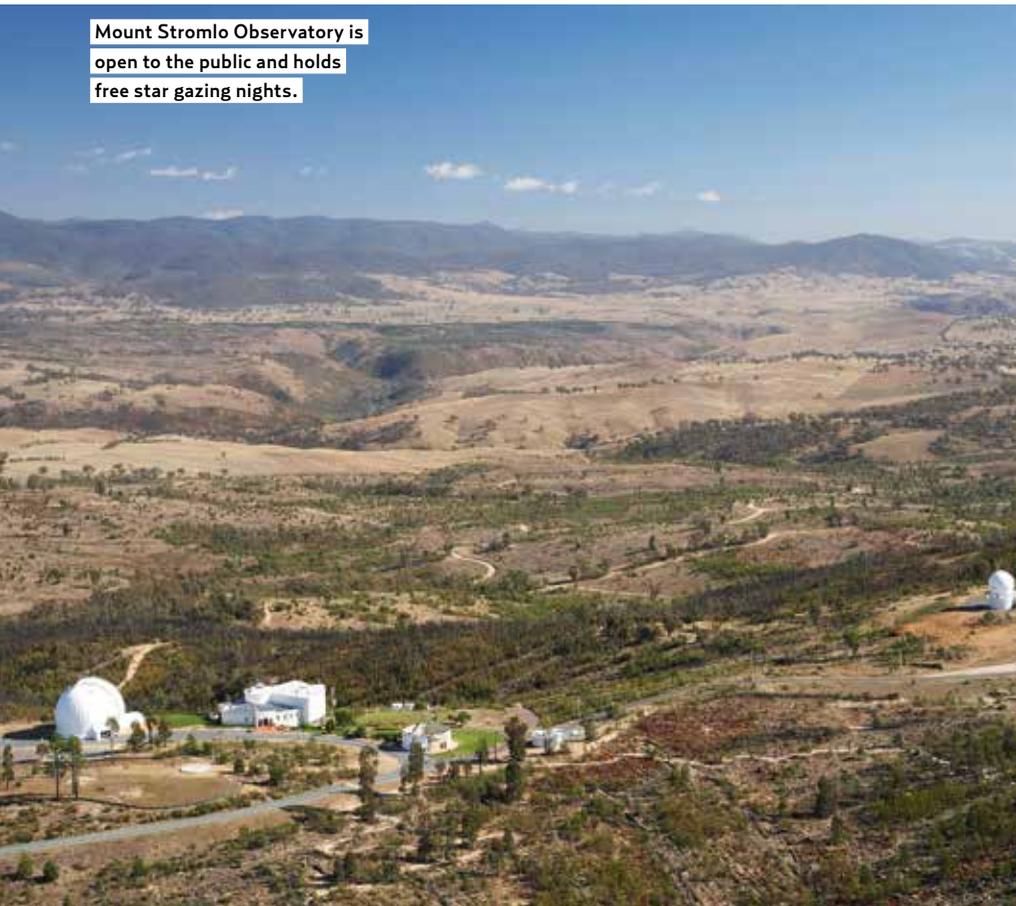
How to get there: Leura is about a 90-minute drive from Sydney.

MOUNT STROMLO OBSERVATORY

Cotter Road, Weston Creek, ACT
It holds various public astronomy nights and daytime tours. Mount Stromlo Observatory is open daily from 8am-6pm.

rsaa.anu.edu.au

How to get there: It's approximately 20 minutes' drive from the Australian National University campus in Canberra.



Credits: Mathias Sorg; Outback Observatory; Alamy/David Wall; Samuel P; Getty Images

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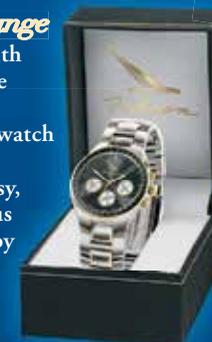
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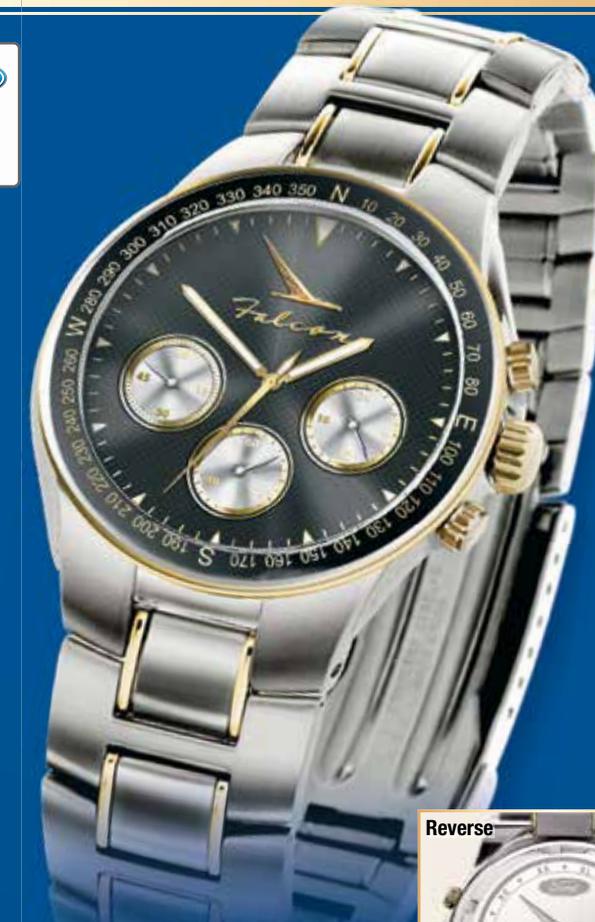
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