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Nights with a heavenly view

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By Laura Bly, USA TODAY

CHACO CULTURE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK, N.M. — Several years ago, a woman approached the visitors center desk at this remote Southwestern outpost, eager to report that she had spotted something remarkable the evening before.

(Related graphic: [How to see the Perseid meteor shower](#))



Spectacular show: A bright Perseid Meteor cuts across Orion's Belt at five a.m. during the peak of the annual shower Aug. 12, 1997.

By Wally Pacholka, AP

Bracing for another overwrought tale of alien UFOs, park ranger and amateur astronomer G.B. Cornucopia listened politely as the bedazzled tourist described a "lane of white powder" spanning the heavens above her campsite.

"It was my great joy," Cornucopia says, "to tell her that for the first time in her life she had actually seen the Milky Way."

Close encounters with celestial objects have been integral to life in Chaco Canyon since the Middle Ages, when the region sheltered one of the Western Hemisphere's most advanced and astronomically observant civilizations. Ancestors of today's Pueblo Indians, the Anasazi, scoured the firmament for guidance on everything from religious rituals to farming.

One thousand years later, star-struck pilgrims brave long drives on a bone-rattling, unpaved road for telescope sessions and astronomy talks weaving past and present.

"When you look up at the night sky at Chaco," Cornucopia says, "you're seeing a direct link between our world and theirs."

Despite, or perhaps because of, light pollution so pervasive that it's estimated more than two-thirds of Americans and Europeans can't see Earth's home galaxy from their backyards, one of history's oldest pastimes is surging in popularity.

Nighttime is the right time here

If you crave stars in your eyes, *Sky & Telescope* magazine (skyandtelescope.com) and its offshoot publication, *Night Sky* (nightskymag.com) offer pointers. Some stargazing destinations far from city lights:

- 1. Tonopah, Nev.** Midway between Reno and Las Vegas, this former silver-mining town promises "the only bright lights you see are the stars." 775-482-3558 or tonopahstartrails.com
- 2. Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah.** Ranger-led full-moon hikes and new-moon "star parties" are the most popular programs at Bryce, which boasts some of the darkest, clearest skies in the continental USA. 435-834-5322; nps.gov/brca/index.htm
- 3. Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, Calif.** Despite light pollution from San Diego two hours to the west, it remains a stargazers' favorite. 760-767-5311; anzaborrego.statepark.org
- 4. Flagstaff, Ariz.** Lowell Observatory offers day and evening tours; Flagstaff was named the first "International Dark-Sky City" for its commitment to non-intrusive outdoor lighting. 800-842-7293; flagstaffarizona.org
- 5. Chaco Culture National Historical Park, N.M.** Ancient and modern astronomy meet in an otherworldly setting. 505-786-7014; nps.gov/chcu
- 6. Cherry Springs State Park, Pa.** Surrounded by the Susquehannock State Forest, this park is a mecca for East Coast stargazers. 888-727-2757; www.UpStateAstro.org/stars/cssp.html
- 7. Mauna Kea, Hawaii.** Bring woolies for a night visit to the world's largest astronomical observatory, at 9,300 feet, on Hawaii's Big Island. 808-961-2180; ifa.hawaii.edu/info/vis/stargazing.html

Participation in the Astronomical League, a Kansas City, Mo.-based federation of primarily amateur astronomers, has doubled in the past decade, to about 20,000 members. Annual "star parties" draw thousands of caffeine-fueled stargazers who stay up till dawn, hunting for nebulae (interstellar clouds and dust) and globular clusters (concentrations of 10,000 to 1 million stars) with the fervor of birdwatchers. Many have computerized "go-to" telescopes with capabilities once limited to the pros.

And whether they're Big Dipper neophytes or nerds of the night inspired by such milestones as this summer's rare transit of Venus and the Cassini-Huygens mission to Saturn, more skywatchers are searching out dark havens. The destinations may be as prosaic as a local campground or as exotic as Libya (a prime viewing spot for the total solar eclipse in March 2006), but reaction to a star-studded evening is universal, says J. Kelly Beatty of *Night Sky*, a new magazine for novice stargazers.

"It's a cliché, but this is the stuff that dreams and imagination are made of," Beatty says.

Particularly here in the Land of Enchantment. Home to some of the country's darkest and clearest skies, New Mexico has long been a magnet for star buffs. Roswell, site of a mysterious crash landing in 1947, is the UFO capital of the world, and the Very Large Array, a radio observatory west of Socorro, played a starring role in Carl Sagan's *Contact*.

One of the best-known portals to New Mexico's nighttime marvels is Chaco Canyon, eerie, windswept desert ruins about midway between Grants and Farmington (or the proverbial Middle of Nowhere).

Chaco began offering astronomy programs in 1991 and opened its own observatory — the only one in a national park — seven years later. Park managers have designated Chaco's night sky a critical resource in need of protection, and they have retrofitted all park lighting to enhance after-dark viewing and reduce light pollution from cities as far afield as Albuquerque, about 150 miles to the southeast.

Today, about 14,000 self-sufficient visitors a year come to gaze and graze on ancient tales. (Aside from the park's 49-space campground and a bare-bones inn in Nageezi, the closest food and lodging is an hour and a half's drive away.)

Given New Mexico's average of more than 300 sunny days a year, chances of scoring a cloudless night in Chaco are high. But even on a Saturday evening when the Anasazi's beloved Father Sky is cloaked by thunderheads, magic is in the air.

Holding forth in the visitors center auditorium, Cornucopia introduces his audience to what he calls the "highly speculative" science of archaeoastronomy, which tries to unravel the astronomical secrets of the society that flourished in Chaco from A.D. 850 to 1250.

Regardless of whether a star-shaped rock painting represents a supernova that exploded in 1054 or whether Anasazi leaders built structures in precise alignment with solar and lunar events, Chaco was "a reflection of what they knew about the sky," Cornucopia says.

If you go ...

With its clear, dark skies, high altitude and wideopen spaces, New Mexico is a stargazer's delight. For general information, contact the New Mexico Tourism Department, 800-733-6396; newmexico.org. Some good bets for heavenly scenery:

☐ **Chaco Culture National Historical Park.** Nightsky programs are offered on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday evenings April to mid-November. 505-786-7014; nps.gov/chcu

Star Hill Inn. On 200 acres near Las Vegas, cabins cost \$165-\$375 per night, including a onehour star tour. 505-425-5605; starhillinn.com

New Mexico Skies. Bordering the Lincoln National Forest near Cloudcroft, accommodations cost \$130-\$200 a night. Sky tours and equipment rental extra. 505-687-2429; nmskies.com

Night Sky Adventures. Owner Geoff Goins offers tours with a 24-inch f4.5 Dobsonian telescope from his base in Red River (near Taos). Rates from \$25 a person. 505-754-2941; nightskyadventures.com

National Public Observatory's Stars-N-Parks. Program offered at state parks in six states. Monthly "star parties" at Leasburg Dam State Park; five other parks participate on a rotating basis from August through May. 505-527-8386; astronomy-national-public-observatory.org

Casitas de Gila. Overlooking the Gila Wilderness near Silver City, these fully equipped guesthouses run \$135 or \$175 a night, including continental breakfast, star charts and a peek at the heavens with the owner's Orion XT10 Dobsonian reflector telescope. 877-923-4827 or casitasdegila.com

"Every culture needs to understand the rhythmic patterns that surround it," he says. "Most of us don't look up very often ... but a thousand years ago, if you asked, 'What is the moon doing tonight?' it would be like asking, 'Where is your left foot?' We need to redevelop a relationship with the darkness."

Another New Mexican vacation spot that nurtures the relationship is Sapello's Star Hill Inn, eight cabins perched amid Ponderosa pines about an hour-and-a-half's drive northeast of Santa Fe and a few miles outside the not-so-glittering town of Las Vegas (pop. 15,000).

Avid stargazer Phil Mahon opened what he calls the nation's first "astronomy retreat" in 1988, catering to skywatchers whose idea of a good time is using Mahon's high-powered binoculars and telescopes, then retreating to a hot bath, comfy bed and fully stocked kitchen. Amenities include a red-tinted flashlight for better night vision and a bottle of locally produced Flyin' Saucer wine.

And for every visitor who taps star coordinates into a laptop and peers breathlessly through Mahon's 22-inch Starsplitter Dobsonian (one of 12 scopes available at Star Hill), there are folks like Mahon's wife, Rae Ann. A mythology expert, she visited after reading about the inn in a magazine. Moments after her arrival, she had fallen madly in love with the proprietor — not to mention the chance to commune with a form of nature that had existed until then only in her mind's eye.

This summer's evening, just before a new moon, guests gather on the Star Hill deck for Rae Ann's killer desserts (homemade ice cream and chocolate peanut butter bars) and a star tour from Phil.

A group of erudite but astronomically illiterate ex-college classmates has chosen the inn as a reunion spot and wouldn't know a meteor from a Messier object (for the record, the latter is one of the relatively bright objects on a list compiled by the 18th-century French comet hunter Charles Messier). And there's Gary A. Becker, a planetarium director who had been awake — and agog — until 4:30 in the morning, entranced by a rising Venus so bright it cast shadows.

On a clear night back home in Coopersburg, Pa., Becker reckons he would be able see 200-300 stars with the naked eye. Tonight, even with a distant lightning storm providing fireworks along the northern horizon, there could be 2,000.

For the next few hours, necks crane as the heavens wheel. The stargazers admire Jupiter and its moons; note the aquamarine hue of the star Vega; and locate M27, a Messier object known as the Dumbbell Nebula for its hourglass shape.

But here, as at Chaco Canyon, the most marvelous sight of all is the Milky Way's vast "lane of white powder." It is a sign of home — and of worlds still waiting beyond our wildest hopes.

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