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# Nights under the

ORION

The stellar mysteries of the skies have inspired earthbound fascination for millennia. As the rare sight of the transit of Venus approaches this summer, **Claire Wrathall** picks the best places to stay and gaze at the beauty of the heavens

CAPTAIN COOK MAY BE known principally as an explorer of lands, however the primary objective of his first voyage on *HMS Endeavour* was not, in fact, to discover Australia, but to observe the transit of Venus across the Sun from Tahiti. The timing of this rare occurrence could, so the English astronomer Edmond Halley had posited a century earlier, be used to calculate the distance of the Sun from Earth. Cook's measurements, along with those by 137 other observers around the then-known world, led to the conclusion that it was 92,955,807.3 miles, a figure now called an 'astronomical unit'.

That transit of Venus occurred on 3 June 1769. This summer it is due to happen again, between 5 and 6 June, for only the eighth time since 1631, when Johannes Kepler predicted it would first occur. And once again, the Pacific will be the best place from which to view it. (It takes about six-and-a-half hours for Venus – visible as a tiny black dot – to travel across the face of the Sun.) The UK specialist operator Explorers Astronomy Tours ([www.astronomytours.co.uk](http://www.astronomytours.co.uk)) recommends the higher slopes of Mauna Kea volcano on Hawaii's Big Island as the optimum place from which to watch it (wearing 'eclipse shades', it should go without saying). The company is running a 10-day trip (from £3,699 per person), including a tour of the Mauna Kea Observatory, which has the world's most powerful telescope.

The transit may be the major event in 2012's astronomical calendar, but wherever the conditions are right – lack of light-spill, no cloud cover, not too bright a moon – the night sky is a phenomenon. Deserts tend to be ideal areas from which to observe it, as are very remote places: Easter Island, for example, or any of the 30 official Dark Sky Preserves, Reserves and Parks (15 of them in Canada) sanctioned by organisations including the International Dark-Sky Association ([www.darksky.org](http://www.darksky.org)) and the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada ([www.rasc.ca](http://www.rasc.ca)).

Those are not the only promoters of stargazing. At the end of last year Alqueva in Portugal was named the world's first Starlight Tourism Destination by the Starlight Foundation ([www.starlight2007.net](http://www.starlight2007.net)), a UNESCO-supported organisation founded to promote both astrophysics and 'tourist activities related to the night sky'. Even hotels are increasingly looking to the heavens, investing in telescopes and state-of-the-art observatories, and hiring resident astronomers. Here are 11 of the most stellar places to stay.

## USA

Utah is the location of the world's first official Gold Tier International Dark Sky Park, an honour bestowed on the Natural Bridges National Monument in 2007. It is also home to Amangiri, not merely one of the most beautifully designed hotels in the Amanresorts portfolio, but one with a resident astronomy guide and a 10in Dobsonian telescope. Throughout the summer there are Monday-night lectures on local 'celestial happenings' and guided tours of the night sky over the 600-acre desert estate, which remains unsullied by light-spill owing to its remote

setting close to the borders with Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico.

Indeed, over the border in Arizona at the Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale at Troon North, 30 miles from Phoenix in the Sonoran Desert, all 22 suites are equipped with powerful telescopes. A map of the night sky is also left on your bed at turndown. Richard Allen, a local astronomer, is on hand to give complimentary tutored stargazing sessions in the grounds on Friday evenings (private sessions on your balcony are available for a fee). Nocturnal excursions into the desert, with a

telescope and night-vision goggles – the better to observe wildlife – are also available.

• There are star-spangled night skies in Wyoming too, notably above Spring Creek Ranch on the edge of the Teton mountains, near Jackson Hole valley. The 1,000-acre ranch is a ski destination in winter, and there is a range of summer activities, from horse-riding, climbing and wildlife safaris to complimentary outdoor stargazing sessions (on Mondays and Thursdays) with Kurt Johnson, a trained biologist, knowledgeable amateur astronomer and

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photographer of constellations. The rings of Saturn, moons of Jupiter and icecaps of Mars are among the natural phenomena that guests have observed through the ranch telescope.

On the other side of the country, in Virginia, Primland is a 12,000-acre estate near the town of Meadows of Dan in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was founded by Didier Primat, the heir to the Schlumberger oil-services fortune, and, until his death in 2008, a fixture on the Forbes list of billionaires. He developed it as a private golf, hunting and fishing

resort and spa. A tower was built in 2009, along with the main lodge, topped by a state-of-the-art 32ft domed observatory, which houses a powerful Celestron CGE Pro 1400. Every night there is a 'tour of the universe' lasting up to two hours, presented by one of the resort's astronomy staff, and a guided 'star walk' through the grounds, giving an opportunity to observe the sky through a 14in portable Celestron.

For guests who would rather spend time in their rooms – and given the standards of luxury you would be forgiven for wanting to –

images from the observatory telescope can be viewed in all 26 rooms and suites in the main lodge, thanks to the resort's closed-circuit TV. Alternatively, you can stay in one of 11 rustic mountain cabins or three pretty timber cottages on the fairway.

Suites at Amangiri from \$1,212; [www.amanresorts.com](http://www.amanresorts.com). Doubles at Spring Creek Ranch from \$170; [www.springcreekranch.com](http://www.springcreekranch.com). Doubles at Primland from \$279; [www.primland.com](http://www.primland.com). Suites at Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale at Troon North from \$524; [www.fourseasons.com](http://www.fourseasons.com)



The night sky over Amangiri, a 600-acre desert estate in Utah

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