

Palm Springs

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EXPERIENCING THE WONDERS OF A STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

By BEKAH WRIGHT
Special Advertising Sections Writer

There's nothing like a moonlit night to elicit sighs of happiness. Some people, however, are more enchanted by a lack of moonlight. On nights like these, the sky comes alive with stars and planets often obscured by the brightness of the moon.

On such a night I joined the Astronomical Society of the Desert (ASOD) for one of its free monthly star parties, which are open to the public. Stargazers

gather in the parking lot of the Coachella Valley Preserve in the Thousand Palms Oasis for star parties held in November through March. From April through October, the group relocates to the slope of Santa Rosa Mountain at the Saw Mill Trailhead off Highway 74. At this site — away from the pollution of city lights — galaxies, globular clusters and nebula are visible.

I went to an event at the Coachella Valley Preserve, arriving at sundown as suggested.

Several ASOD members were

observing cloud formations, trying to decide which looked more like space ships. Others were willing the clouds to move on, making way for a clear view of the heavens. I held my breath, hoping bad weather or high winds wouldn't make viewing difficult. Soon enough, the pink-and-orange-streaked sky faded away, replaced by a star-filled firmament.

The telescopes were crowd pleasers — coming in all shapes and sizes, including Newtonian Reflecting telescopes on Dobsonian mountings, refracting tele-

scopes and Schmidt-Cassegrain telescopes. Members of the ASOD focused on different targets and then stepped aside, more than happy to share and educate.

"Our motto is, 'A joy shared is a joy made double,'" said Ashley Thomas McDermott, the group's founder. "We like sharing the joy of looking through a telescope."

The ASOD was started by McDermott in 1972. A professor emeritus of astronomy and history at the College of the Desert, McDermott initially built membership by offering his students extra credit for attending star parties. Over the years the membership has grown to more than 100, due largely to community outreach efforts.

In addition to monthly star parties, a free, public lecture is held at 7:30 p.m. on the second Friday of the month in the meeting room of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Palm Desert from October through May. Taking the podium are renowned educators as well as professional and amateur astronomers. Topics include space science and astro photography.

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The society also periodically offers Sidewalk Astronomy sessions. At such locales as The River at Rancho Mirage, the ASOD sets up telescopes and gives shoppers a gander at the planets. (Announcements about when and where these will be held are made at the lectures, meetings and stargazing parties.)

"Once we start setting up our telescopes we get lines," said John Frazier, sidewalk astronomy chairman. "Even if the telescope is just focused on the moon. A lot of

people haven't really seen the moon close up except in pictures. If they're amazed at that, they're absolutely astounded by looking at Saturn."

Kay Kearns had her first encounter with ASOD at The River at Rancho Mirage several years ago. One look through the telescope and she was hooked.

"I saw four of Jupiter's moons," she said. "It was pretty exciting."

In addition, the group holds special events tied to what's happening in the heavens — from meteor showers to the occasional comet.

"A couple of years ago we had a star party devoted to Mars when it was close to the Earth in its orbit," Frazier said. "It was quite an event. We saw some really amazing things such as patterns on the Martian surface and polar ice caps."

"The poets tell us on a dark, clear night you can see forever," McDermott said. "You can't see forever, but in October out in the desert under a beautiful dark night sky you can look up at Andromeda [Galaxy] and see a fuzzy bulb of light. It took three million years for the light that left that galaxy to reach your eye."

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McDermott's words hit home as I looked through a telescope and spotted Saturn and its rings. It didn't seem real, but there it was: bright, clear and out of this world.

For information about ASOD functions, visit www.astrorx.org. Upcoming star party dates are July 22, Aug. 19, Sept. 23, Oct. 21, Nov. 18 and Dec. 16.

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