

Tenerife: The view from my hotel? The Milky Way

Sunny Tenerife is the perfect place to train a telescope on the firmament. Deborah King explains

Published: 31 July 2005

At the time when tourists in the lively south of Tenerife are still considering which nightclub to go to, I am already seeing stars. Far from being inebriated, I am looking at the Moon through a large black telescope. The Moon is almost full - not ideal for stargazing but perfect, when magnified 48 times, for comparing it to a roundel of goats' cheese.

"No telescope, however powerful, can see anything on the Moon's surface that measures less than 300 metres," explains Juan Vicente, who gives a star-gazing presentation every Friday night at the Parador de Canadas del Teide, a hotel in the centre of Tenerife's national park in the Canary Islands. The parador has three telescopes for guests and we are using the largest.

This remote hotel is a large mountain chalet that lies in the crater zone, more than 2,000 metres above sea level, an area of around 16 square kilometres that is made up of lava fields, a sandy crater and unusual, giant rock formations. The views of the 3,718m Mount Teide, the highest mountain in Spain, and the surrounding landscape are stunning. The dining room at the parador has large windows which, by day, are well placed for catching a glimpse of the cable car as it makes its six-minute journey to the top of the mountain.

The combination of high altitude, low humidity and little artificial light makes the island one of the best places in the world to observe the stars and the Solar System. We take it in turns to view the Moon as Juan moves the lens to pick up different aspects of the planet's surface. The huge number of craters gives us a clue about its violent past. "Can you see the long spider's legs?" he asks. "That's where the asteroid penetrated the surface."

Observing the sky at night in this way, we feel as if only Mount Teide and the twilight separate us from the blanket of stars twinkling above our heads.

Juan highlights the formations we are about to study with a giant image of the constellations projected on to one side of the parador. After a brief summary, he turns off the power and we wait a while for our eyes to adapt to the dark again. I learn how to recognise Jupiter and Sagittarius, and that one star in his bow is 250 times brighter than the Sun.

Since it raises questions about our origins and our place in the universe, stargazing has fascinated people for thousands of years. The ancient Chinese produced the first sky maps and the Egyptians planned their festivals and events around the Moon, Sun and stars. But it was the ancient Greeks who turned looking at the sky into a science. Surprisingly, the existence of planets outside the Solar System was confirmed only 10 years ago when 51 Pegasi, a planet around a star was discovered. Since then, 130 extra-solar planets have been found but these are visible only with highly sophisticated equipment.

One of the most important solar observatories in the world is based on the edge of the national park, a 20-minute drive from the parador. As the road bends, the Teide Observatory at Izana rises above a hilltop to reveal a series of prominent white domes that look like giant beehives. Astrophysics, a modern form of astronomy, began in the Canary Islands in the 1960s, and the first telescope was installed in 1964. At the moment the observatory

contains telescopes and other instruments belonging to more than 60 institutions from at least 19 countries.

This key observatory opens its doors once a week, with guided tours every Friday. It's such an amazing experience, you don't have to be a science buff to enjoy a visit here. The sheer size of the equipment is astonishing, with most bearing no resemblance to the usual telescope-cum-tripod. The first dome I enter contains an enormous 42-ton telescope with a spectrograph, which allows the scientists to see separation of the Sun's colours. "It's a bit like seeing a rainbow effect," says Luis Cuesta, our guide, who has worked here since 1988. Other domes include a German telescope that gathers information about the Sun's spots and a new robotic telescope supplied by Bradford University.

That evening, I join a group of British tourists on a star-gazing excursion to Los Roques de Garcia, an area of gigantic rock formations opposite the parador. These once separated the two craters of Las Canadas.

By 10pm the sun has set casting a halo of light around Mount Teide and Los Roques and the night sky once again becomes a twinkling mass. Remembering what Juan had told us, I recognise Sagittarius and trace his bow towards the heart of Scorpius before following the long, curving line of its tail to the tip. I also spot the Plough, Polaris and Delphinus, a dolphin and one of the smallest summertime constellations.

Star-gazing is a humbling experience, putting into perspective our place in this vast universe. Mount Teide is one of Tenerife's shining stars.

Give Me The Facts

How to get there

British Airways flies from Gatwick and Manchester to Tenerife. Returns start at ?99 from Gatwick and ?129 from Manchester (0870-850 9850; <http://www.ba.com/>).

Where to stay

Parador de Las Canadas del Teide, 38300 La Orotava (00 34 922 386 415; <http://www.parador.es/>) offers double rooms from ?132 (?94) per night, based on two sharing, including breakfast.

What to do

The Parador offers stargazing free to guests every Friday night in association with Volcanes y Estrellas <http://www.teideastro.com>. The next shower of shooting stars, Perseids can be viewed from 11-13 August.

Further information

Tenerife Natural (<http://www.tenerifenatural.com/>).