

# Enjoy the Celestial Sights

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Looking at the wondrous display of the nighttime sky, it's not surprising that astronomy has been a source of fascination since time immemorial. In ancient times, the movements of the stars, planets, moons, and more were carefully tracked, with those observations used to determine ideal times for planting, harvesting, marriages, and other events, as well as for navigation. Viewers would gaze upon the points of light visible in the heavens above, mentally connecting the dots between many of them and naming them for figures familiar to them through their cultures' myths and legends. Although we have come to rely less upon these celestial shifts in our daily lives over time, the cosmos have not lost their allure to us, as many people around the globe are beguiled by their beckoning beauty.

If you've ever considered taking up astronomy as a hobby, it might be encouraging to know that, according to most enthusiasts, it's easier to learn than you may think. Also, while higher-end telescopes and other equipment may be expensive, getting started requires very little, if any, investment on your part.

One of the greatest joys in this pursuit is in being able to navigate your way around the starry sky and understand what you see. Begin with a trip to the astronomy section of your local library or bookstore, where you can peruse a variety of beginner's guides. These cover the basics about the moon, planets, and constellations, helping you to start familiarizing yourself with the features of the nightly panoramic display. When you're still at the library or bookstore, check out magazines such as *Sky & Telescope*, where you'll find a variety of topics, including practical tips for observers, reviews of

the newest equipment, and articles on fascinating celestial phenomena. Look up "stargazing" or "amateur astronomy" online, and you'll find more information, right at your fingertips.

Before taking the next step, you'll want to obtain an inexpensive tool called a star chart, finder, or wheel, also known as a constellation map. Be sure to select one for the northern hemisphere for use in the Gulf Coast area. By dialing in your time and date, this instrument helps you to identify the constellations visible from your viewing location. A variety of apps provide further assistance: with some, you can aim your phone toward the sky and the app will connect the dots, illustrating the figures for which the constellations are named. Have these tools in hand when you go out on a clear, dark night, and you can start to acquaint yourself with the star patterns overhead. If you live in a brightly lit city or town, find a place where there's less light pollution or at least a spot that's free from as much glare from nearby lights as possible so that you can see more stars.

To enhance your experience, enthusiasts recommend using binoculars as your "first telescope" for multiple reasons. They show you a wide field of view, making it easy to find your way around the sky. They also give you a view that's right side up and straight in front of you, making it easy to see where



## Key Sights by Season

As the earth continues in its annual orbit, its movement ensures that stargazers can see different sections of the night sky throughout the year. *Sky & Telescope* advises that the following celestial attractions are the "stars" of their respective seasons in the northern hemisphere.

### Summer (July-September)

The "Summer Triangle," consisting of bright stars Altair, Deneb, and Vega; the constellations Lyra, Cygnus, Scorpius, and Sagittarius; and the long band of star clouds of the Milky Way.

### Fall (October-December)

The lonely star Fomalhaut; the "Great Square" of Pegasus; the constellations Andromeda, Cassiopeia, Pegasus, and Perseus; the Andromeda Galaxy; the Pleiades and the constellation Taurus; and a first glimpse of Orion.

### Winter (January-March)

The bright octagonal group of stars, Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, Capella, Castor, Pollux, Procyon, Rigel, and Sirius; and the constellations Orion, Gemini, Canis Major, Taurus, and Auriga.

### Spring (April-June)

The Big Dipper; Polaris, the North Star; Regulus and the constellation Leo; the bright stars Arcturus and Spica; Corona Borealis, the Northern Crown. Above the western horizon after sunset lie the bright yellow-white star Capella and the stars Castor and Pollux in the constellation Gemini.



## Stargazing...

you're pointing. Binoculars are fairly inexpensive, widely available, and easy to carry and store. They're also versatile; you can switch from terrestrial to celestial viewing in an instant. According to *Sky & Telescope*, their performance is surprisingly respectable: ordinary 7- to 10-power binoculars improve on the unaided eye about as much as a good amateur telescope improves on binoculars—and at a far lower cost. For astronomy, the larger the front lenses are, the better. High optical quality is important too. That being said, about any binoculars you can get your hands on are enough to launch your amateur astronomy career.

Once you've learned your way around the night sky, binoculars can keep you busy for years. With good maps and reference books, you can identify dozens of the moon's craters, plains, and mountains. Among the many avenues for observation, binoculars will show you the ever-changing positions of Jupiter's moons and the crescent phases of Venus, plus will allow you to follow the fading and brightenings of numerous variable stars. Moreover, the skills you'll develop using maps and guidebooks with binoculars are precisely the same ones needed to put a telescope to good use.

Like anything, sharing the hobby you love with others who equally enjoy it can be tremendously rewarding. Hundreds of astronomy clubs exist around the world, including some meet-up groups, as

well as online forums where you can chat with others, share stories, get tips, and more. Connect with a local club and you may be able to attend an all-night observing session that's known as a "star party," where you can often try out different telescopes, learn new techniques, and make new friends.

When you're ready for your first telescope, be prepared that this is one occasion where you won't want to skimp on quality. The two essential characteristics you'll need to look for are high-quality, "diffraction-limited" optics and a solidly constructed, steady, smoothly working mount. While large aperture (size) is nice to have and built-in computers and motors are nifty extras, looking for these two qualities ensures that you end up with an instrument that's portable and convenient. After all, the best telescope is the one that you will actually use!

The most important thing, though, is to relax and enjoy the process. Instead of being frustrated by any less-than-perfect views or being unable to locate a specific object, learn to take pleasure in whatever your eyes, binoculars, or telescope can show you because the truth is that as you look more, you will see more. As you gain experience, you'll not only derive satisfaction from this incredible ability; you'll also feel a secure sense of your place in the cosmos. So, set your own course and let the majesty of the universe unfold before you!



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