



IT'S THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF ASTRONOMY, SO WHAT BETTER REASON TO GRAB A TELESCOPE AND HEAD TO GREECE, WHERE AN EXPERT STARGAZER IS OPENING VISITORS' EYES TO A

WORDS BY HEIDI FULLER-LOVE→



When was the last time you gazed at the night sky? For many of us, the firmament is simply a background to life on earth—the stars, if they're not obscured by city lights, a pretty twinkling to glance at now and then, the moon a useful glow on the way home from a night out. But if you've ever been intrigued by the universe, an astronomy course might be just for you.

Far from the madding crowds, traffic fumes and light pollution of major urban centres, the night skies over Crete, the Greek island where King Minos once fed virgins to the Minotaur, are crystal clear. Seduced by these favourable conditions, self-avowed star-freak, 47-year-old Filip Feys, and painter/wife Chantal Debrabandere, moved lock, stock and a lot of telescope barrels southward from their native Brussels in

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Belgium and set up Sasteria, a star-watching academy a couple of hours drive east of Heraklion.

Light years from Brussels' busy streets—but just half an hour's drive from the lovely beaches of low-key seaside resort Makri Gialou—Sasteria clings to the hem of a tiny Greek village knitted together by winding alleys sprinkled with goat droppings that lead to three kafeneions, an olive factory and the usual smattering of blue-roofed churches.

With four telescopes, each the size of a

donkey, out front, the couple's newly renovated house attracts a lot of local interest. But then taking an interest in the universe is nothing new to the Greeks, who gave us the word teleskopos (literally "far-seeing"). "When I go for my Ouzo served with a plate of mezes snacks up at the kafeneion, little old men with no teeth who've lived in the village all their lives point out stars and ask me what they are—they're genuinely keen to know," Filip says.

Heavily into the heavenly constellations when his adolescent compeers were







mooning over Frida Lyngstad, Filip has a 27-year collection of gleaming optics the size of dinner plates stashed all over his house. "A telescope sees further in direct proportion to the amount of light it gathers, so you're always trying to buy bigger and bigger lenses," he explains.

Take one of those huge shiny things and add on a barrel the size and shape of a paper bin and you're looking at a bill of about £20,000. "Stargazing is an expensive business." Chantal says ruefully.

Eager to find out what it's all about, one warm evening in early spring I join a group of adults and two teenagers on Sasteria's panoramic terrace. In front of us, four huge telescopes point to a sky yawning black as the vault of a treasure chest scattered with millions of brilliant gems.

Fey gives a short introduction, leaving us time to get used to the dark so that we will be able to see into deep sky. "Deep sky means objects situated outside the solar system. On a dark run, when you have 14 days with no moon, you get a good deep sky, but on a clear run you can see moon, stars and planets, but no deep sky," he explains.

We learn that stars are grouped into constellations that are often given the names of figures in Greek mythology, thanks to Homer and co. Galaxies are huge groups of stars and groups of galaxies like the Milky Way are bigger still. In addition to looking out for these star-based formations, there are of course the planets, meteors, comets and moon. Then we get down to the practical stuff. Amid cries of: "Look at that space ship—oh no, it's my eyelash," we take what



★ STAR GAZE ON CRETE

Sasteria, Agios-Stéfanos, Crete; tel: +30 69 4514 3787, www.sasteria.com

International Year of Astronomy, www.astronomy2009.org

OTHER PLACES TO SEE THE STARS

★ Royal Planetarium, Brussels, Belgium

One of Europe's largest planetariums. www.planetarium.be

★ Paris observatory, France

The City of Light's renowned centre of astronomy opens its doors for the annual Nuit des Planètes in April. www.obspm.fr

★ Zeiss Grossplanetarium, Berlin, Germany

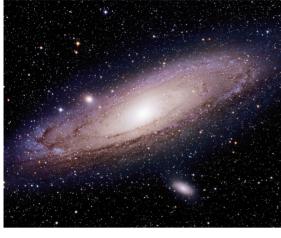
Gaze at astronomical instruments from the famous Zeiss factory or take a journey through the Solar System at East Berlin's celebrated planetarium.

www.planetarium-bochum.de

★ L'Observatoire,

near Geneva, Switzerland

Combine a fondue meal with stargazing at this family-friendly observatory and hotel/restaurant, which clings to the 2,000m-high peak of mighty Mount Moléson. www.moleson.ch









"OS ELENIM ATE MIN ER INCIPIS MOLESSISL EXEL QUISLUT LUPT."

is for most of us our first peek through a professional telescope.

Bright as a light-therapy lamp, a supernova—an exploded star that creates a black hole so small and so dense that not even light can escape from its clutches—shimmers back at us through the 250mm F/2130 Tal Klevzov Cassegrain telescope.

"Remember that there are other planets up there with their own solar systems, just like us, and there are billions of galaxies with similar planets and similar solar systems so say 'hi', because there might be people up there on other planets looking back at you right now," Filip jokes.

Next we squint at the Owl Nebula, in the constellation Ursa Major. Filip tells us that nebulas are like nurseries where clouds of dust, gas and other materials clump together to form "baby" stars. We agree that you need

to be an astronomer to see past these diffuse specks of light and perceive two dark holes and a brighter patch in the middle, which are the Owl's eyes and beak.

Switching to the larger 500 mm F/2400 Newton, we marvel at Pan, Prometheus and Pandora, just a few of Saturn's 60-plus moons, while questions about life and the universe fuse like Jovian gas (for the uninitiated: the gas that Jupiter and Saturn are composed of). With problems of global warming top of the world's agenda and pie-in-the-sky sci-fi notions of commercial space tourism rapidly becoming scientific

fact, there are lots of questions about the possibility of populating other planets. "Within the next 50 years we'll build huge floating stations where people can live in outer space. It's much cheaper [than populating planets]," Filip opines.

Thanks to Filip' star academy—and EASYJET
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★ DID YOU KNOW?

- ★ Along with some of his early telescopes, the Museum of the History of Science in Florence, Italy has on exhibit the famous astronomer Galileo's middle finger.
- ★ Europe is funding the building of the world's biggest radio telescope. The size of two football pitches, The Square Kilometre Array should be ready to view by 2020
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MAJOR STARGAZER DATES THIS YEAR INCLUDE:

- ★ Partial lunar eclipses on 6th August and 31st December
- ★ A total eclipse of the sun on 22nd July
- ★ In September the rings of the planet Saturn disappear for three months. This strange optical illusion, due to the planet's position, last occurred in 1996