

Seven Magnificent Star Gazing Destinations

Star gazing is something we do every day, almost without thinking about it, and yet it's also one of the most transcendent experiences in the world, an activity that enables us to gaze into the reaches of space and the wonders of the universe. But even though we can view stars every night from any place on Earth, there is still nothing quite like seeing the Milky Way galaxy and some of its more than 100 billion stars through a truly clear sky. Here are seven of the world's most magnificent star gazing destinations.



Mauna Kea, Hawaii

Hawaii is one of the best star gazing locations in the world because its setting in the middle of the Pacific Ocean leaves it free of many of the ravages of light pollution. The best viewing in Hawaii is from 9,000-foot-high Mauna Kea on the Big Island. Mauna Kea is home to the Keck Observatory and the future site of the Thirty-Meter Telescope, which will be operational in 2018. Nightly star gazing programs are offered at the Onizuka Visitors Center.

Atacama Desert, Chile

Chile is considered to be Hawaii's chief rival for the title of the world's best star gazing location. And the best spot in Chile is the Atacama Desert. The Atacama is the highest desert on Earth and has the advantages of high altitude, dry air, and low light pollution. There are public tours available through the Observatorio Cerro Mamalluca, or you can book a unique star gazing experience at the Hotel Elqui Domos, where seven rooms with detachable roofs provide guests with a starry canvas from their beds.



South Island, New Zealand

The nations of the southern hemisphere are unique star gazing destinations because you'll have a different perspective on the sky and will view stars that aren't visible in the north, particularly the Southern Cross constellation. New Zealand, along with Chile, is a prime star gazing location in the southern hemisphere. On the South Island, you should head for Lake Tekapo township in the Southern Alps. There, the Mount John Observatory will provide you with stunning nighttime shows.

Uluru, Australia

Australia also has a number of good southern hemisphere viewing locations. The most memorable experience, though, takes place in the center of the continent at Uluru (Ayers Rock). There, during the Sounds of Silence event, you can dine in the open air as an astronomer explains the stars of the southern sky. Or, you can skip the dinner and the talk and simply enjoy the sight of thousands of stars shimmering in the sky above the sacred rock of Uluru.



Sonoran Desert, Arizona

The Southwestern United States has a number of fantastic star gazing spots and has the benefit of being easier to reach than some of the other prime viewing locations, at least if you're already in North America. The place to begin is the Sonoran Desert and the city of Tucson, which houses the headquarters of the International Dark-Sky Association. More important for star gazing purposes, it's also home to Kitt Peak National Observatory and the Mt. Lemmon SkyCenter, which both have public viewing programs.

Natural Bridges National Monument, Utah

Natural Bridges National Monument gets the nod here since it was the first place to be named an International Dark Sky Park and has summertime astronomy programs led by park rangers. However, this destination should perhaps be known as "national parks of the American West," since many of the public lands in this part of North America are fantastic places for star gazing. These include Bryce Canyon in Utah; Grand Canyon in Arizona; Great Basin in Nevada; Chaco Culture in New Mexico, and Joshua Tree, Yosemite, and Death Valley in California.

Namib Desert, Namibia

Finally, it's not a surprise that a number of African destinations would be good for star gazing, as much

of the continent has low levels of light pollution and an abundance of cloudless nights. One especially interesting location, though, is the Namib Desert of Namibia. Many travelers head there for the dramatic sand dunes, but the nocturnal shows are just as amazing. For a distinct experience, you can book a room at the Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, which has its own observatory and astronomers.

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