

THE SKY AT NIGHT

There are some immensely clear and gloriously spectacular night skies across the world, many that must be seen to be believed. Here, our specialists choose their favourites.



Elqui Valley, Chile

In the Elqui Valley, an hour's flight north of Santiago, the sun shines over vineyards and picturesque villages by day, but the most startling attraction appears at night when the skies become lit up by a dazzling array of stars. For a truly out of this world experience, visit the valley's Marmalluca Observatory where every night, astronomers take a small group of visitors on a tour of the clearest skies in the southern hemisphere. I was lucky enough to be among them one night in February. Caught up by the astronomer's infectious enthusiasm, I asked if I could see Mars and with a quick press of a button, he made the giant telescope swivel round and I was treated to an incredible view of its glowing red surface. I may have since forgotten the names of the myriad of stars and other galaxies that I was shown that night, but I will never forget the sheer awe I felt standing on a quiet hilltop in northern Chile with this huge expanse of universe stretching endlessly above my head.

Emily Thomlinson: 01993 838 622

Loliondo Camp, Tanzania

Loliondo Camp is tucked away at the base of a kopje on the fringes of the Serengeti. It is based on land owned by the Maasai, a number of whom are now involved in the camp. The rooms are not Meru-style tents seen in so many safari camps but are unique Mongolian style yurts, built specifically with a large round window in the roof apex. This is covered in gauze to keep out bugs but let in light. At night, lying in your bed you can see straight out of the roof to the stars, and with no light pollution they are nothing short of brilliant. Falling asleep you can watch the night sky and listen out for the whoop of a hyena. Waking in the morning you often hear the cattle bells as the Maasai take their goats and cows down to the nearby river. Just a short distance from the Serengeti this is a quirky and fun place from which to explore on safari.

Alexandra Matts: 01993 838 512

Broome, Western Australia

Between March and October, Western Australia's winter, Roebuck Bay in Broome hosts a somewhat magical phenomenon. During low tide, as the moon rises above the horizon it leaves a fiery orange reflection along the exposed flats, creating a beautiful optical illusion of a 'set of stairs' reaching to the moon, known as the 'staircase to the moon'. This popular sight is a draw card for visitors and locals alike as they scatter along the shoreline, many making an evening of the event by bringing along picnics and wine. More often than not, a glass is raised and a cheer goes up as the last step appears.

Rachel Wood: 01993 838 800

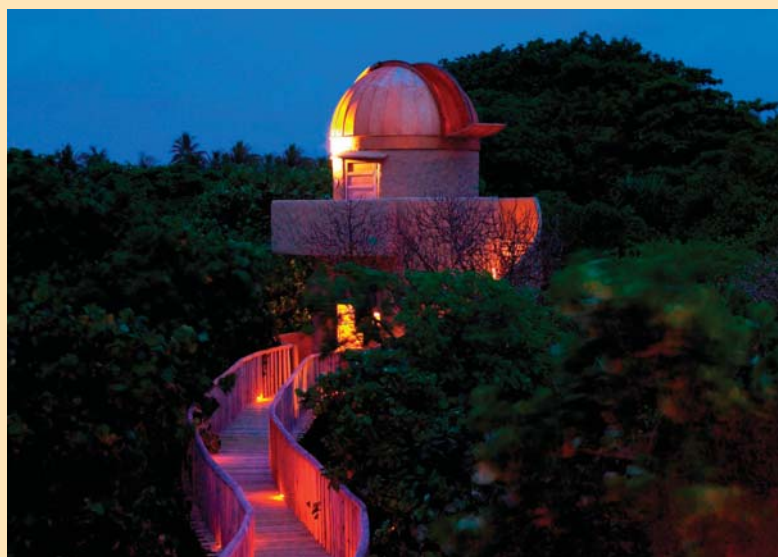
Staircase to the moon, Broome



Aurora Borealis, Arctic



Loliondo camp, Tanzania



Soneva Fushi, Maldives

Northern Canada

One of the great joys of travelling to northern Canada and, indeed, anywhere within the Arctic Circle, is the possibility of seeing the dancing celestial phenomenon of the Aurora Borealis. Also known as the Northern Lights, this dramatic spectacle is a result of charged particles in solar winds emanating from the sun in the region of the Magnetic North Pole. Vivid reds, greens and, less often, violets and blues, shimmer in dazzling displays that can last for hours or just a few minutes. Long winter nights with clear skies make for the best viewing but conditions are also good in late August, September and March in northern parts of the Yukon, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

Oliver Clayfield: 01993 838 708

Maldivian night skies

Far away from any major cities, the absence of light pollution means that the night skies are spectacular and breathtaking. This beauty is certainly recognised by almost all the hotels as they each have a powerful portable telescope for their guests to use. But Soneva Fushi is taking it further and they have just opened their own Astronomical Observatory equipped with a professional class astronomical telescope. The 12-metre high observatory tower houses the telescope on the upper most level, high above the tree-line canopy, along with a fully-automated dome providing uncompromised 360 degree views of the night sky. For guests wishing to learn more about astronomy, the second level houses a comprehensive reference library complete with educational books suitable for all ages and knowledge levels.

Leah Bruton: 01993 838 321

Song Kol, Kyrgyzstan

The USSR based much of its astronomical research in Central Asia, and with good reason: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have some of the clearest night skies anywhere in the world. The easiest way to see Kyrgyzstan's fabulous night sky is by staying in a traditional yurt. These nomadic structures are used by herders throughout the Tien Shan and many double up as accommodation for visitors in the summer months of June, July, August and early September. Song Kol, an alpine lake high in the mountains, is perhaps the best place to sample traditional nomadic life in Central Asia. Once the sun goes down the thinness and clarity of the mountain air provides unparalleled views of the Milky Way.

Chris Moore: 01993 838 213

Akakus mountains, Libya

Deserts are well known for the clarity of their night skies and the Libyan Sahara is one of the very best examples. Camping deep in the Akakus Mountains, you can be as much as a day's drive from the nearest permanent settlement and therefore the nearest light pollution. If you nip out from your tent in the middle of the night, long after the campfire's last embers have gone out, you'll be rewarded with a ghostly landscape of sand dunes reflecting the surprisingly intense light of the moon and stars.

Sarah Whatman: 01993 838 409