

The starriest skies in the world

Astronomer Carl Sagan once said, "The sky calls to us. If we do not destroy ourselves, we will one day venture to the stars." In the meantime, here are 12 of the planet's best places to downshift and dream, while constellations shimmer against the darkness.

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Natural Bridges National Monument, Utah

Watch the Milky Way rise over Owachomo Bridge, a dramatic rock arch in the state's southeast. Up to 15,000 stars can blaze here — enough to cast a shadow — compared with the 500 or so visible from more urban viewpoints. A forerunner in the battle against light pollution, Natural Bridges became the first certified International Dark Sky Park in 2007.


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Exmoor National Park, England

Stags gallop across the moors under some of Europe's starriest skies. Four hours west of London, the park blends cozy tearooms with storm-battered cliffs plunging into the Bristol Channel. But one constant remains: the nighttime splendor, boosted by low light pollution and regularly clear nights. A pocket guide walks beginners through basic tips — such as “avoid the moon” and “bring a red-filtered flashlight” — and recommends some good spots, such as Holdstone Hill, Webbers Post and Brendon Two Gates.

[Bing: View photos of Exmoor National Park](#)



Jasper National Park, Alberta

The aurora borealis sometimes crackles across the world's largest dark-sky preserve, high in the spectacular Canadian Rockies. The [park lodge](#) anchors the [Jasper Dark Sky Festival](#) each October in this UNESCO World Heritage Site. Kids can rev up at First Nations drum circles before test-driving the take-home Celestron telescope bundled into the hotel's stargazing package. Meanwhile, constellation connoisseurs can attend lectures and workshops on topics such as astrophotography with NASA and National Geographic contributor [Yuichi Takasaka](#). After the gala, hundreds of participants stroll — or ride a horse-drawn carriage — to Pyramid Island, a veritable red carpet of Canadian astronomy. Trails, marked by flickering scarlet votives, lead to demonstrations and the tranquil beauty of stars reflected on the lake.

[Bing: View more photos of Jasper National Park](#)



Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve, New Zealand

The Magellanic Clouds — satellite galaxies to the Milky Way — glow brightly over this reserve on the South Island, established last summer. Cradled by the Southern Alps, the 2,672-square-mile area unfolds clear, pollution-free vistas. Astro-tourists can peer through telescopes and sip hot chocolate in a candle-lit café at New Zealand's premier scientific observatory, Mt John at Lake Tekapo, through [Earth & Sky expeditions](#).

[Bing: View photos of Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve](#)



Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station, Antarctica

The South Pole's inhospitable elements make it a top destination for stargazing, especially the cold, dry air and round-the-clock winter darkness. Astronomers kick things up a notch with stadium-sized balloons to hold instruments aloft at 35,000 feet. Civilians may prefer to scan the skies and explore the White Continent aboard a [Lindblad Expeditions' ship](#), however. The company partners with National Geographic and has scooped Travel + Leisure's Best Cruise Line for Families award since 2009.

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NamibRand Nature Reserve, Namibia

Leopards stalk among the grasslands and scarlet dunes of the southwestern Namib Desert. This stony landscape has moments of surreal beauty, but "the land God made in anger," earned its nickname because of its heat and remote harshness. Still, there's plenty to merit a trip, including [safaris](#) that mix in some of the planet's best stargazing. To protect indigenous plants and animals accustomed to deep darkness, the area became Africa's first dark-sky reserve in spring 2012 — a pioneering move among developing countries.

[Bing: View more photos of NamibRand Nature Reserve](#)



Atacama Desert, Chile

Pale, pink flamingos stride across the salt flats, as galaxies and star clusters blaze in the nearly cloudless skies. In fact, parts of the pampas haven't seen rain since recordkeeping began, so there's little humidity to diminish celestial views in the driest place on Earth.

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Acadia National Park, Maine

Rockefellers and Vanderbilts once summured on Millionaire's Row in Bar Harbor, during the Gilded Age. A less corseted crowd now enjoys [the park's](#) sea cliffs, pocket lakes and stone-faced bridges, especially when autumn ignites the foliage. But the stars can dazzle year-round, thanks to efforts to keep the heavens as black as a gentleman's top hat. Celebrate the town's success at mid-September's Acadia Night Sky Festival, under the largest expanse of natural dark east of the Mississippi.

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The Marquesas, French Polynesia

Rugged, volcanic islands rocket up from the Pacific in one the world's most remote inhabited archipelagos, 850 miles northeast of Tahiti. The Post-Impressionist artist Paul Gauguin famously captured the culture's lushness, but that was counterbalanced by cannibals imprisoning "Moby Dick" author Herman Melville. By day, snorkel over black pearls and hike to tikis tangled in bamboo and vanilla vines. Then watch the night skies shine aboard the cargo-freighter ship [Aranui 3](#), famed for its friendly staff and muscular longshoremen.

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Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument, Washington

Famous for its cataclysmic eruption in 1980, the [Mount St. Helens](#) is a remarkably good stargazing site despite its proximity to two major cities: Portland, Ore., two hours southwest, and Seattle, four hours north. The [Mount St. Helens Institute](#) runs field seminars, but independent clubs also gather there, including the [Vancouver Sidewalk Astronomers](#). "It's a hobby, but it's also inspirational," says the group's founder, Stan Seeberg, "especially when the stars look like diamonds on black velvet from the mountain."

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Esrange Space Center, Kiruna, Sweden

Around 600 miles north of Stockholm, scientists have been lobbing rockets and balloons into the stratosphere since the peak of the Atomic Era. Tourists can visit this [research center](#), Europe's first commercial spaceport, above the Arctic Circle on a [guided tour](#). Or just take advantage of the tundra's conditions to stargaze from the world's largest [ice hotel](#).

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