

World event hopes to lure 1 mln to astronomy

April 2 2009



Bulgarian children look at a eclipse of the sun through a telescope in the Black Sea port of Varna in 2005. At sunset on Thursday, astronomers around the world will be limbering up for a 100-hour marathon aimed at celebrating the night sky and nurturing the Galileos of tomorrow.

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The exercise has been "400 years in the making," says the Paris-based [International Astronomical Union](#) (IAU), referring to observations made in 1609 by the Italian genius that swept away our conception of the [Universe](#).

"It is a sense of discovery and awe that [astronomers](#) wish to share with our fellow citizens all over the world," says IAU president Catherine

Cesarsky.

With more than 1,500 events in 130 countries, the mass view-in could draw more than a million people, busting all records for participation in astronomy, the IAU hopes.

At grassroots level, local astronomical associations intend to set up telescopes in streets and parks for passers-by to glimpse through and provide sky shows in retirement homes and military bases.

There will be a global audience, too, thanks to observation "tweets" posted on Twitter.com and professional astronomers who will be providing webcasts using the mightiest telescopes ever made.

The beasts include the Gemini North and Keck telescopes in Hawaii, Europe's Very Large Telescope in the deserts of Chile and the orbital Hubble and XMM-Newton telescopes, which delve into the depths of the cosmos.

The "100 Hours of Astronomy" is a cornerstone event of the International Year of Astronomy (IYA).

One of the big participants is Britain, which has been placing a special focus on the Moon.

"Your first view of the Moon through a telescope is something you remember for the rest of your life," says Andy Fabian, a professor of astronomy at Cambridge and president of Britain's Royal Astronomical Society.

"After a career spent studying exotic objects across the Universe, I still feel moved when I look at the extraordinary grandeur of the [lunar surface](#)."

One of the big contributions to the IYA has been the advent of an inexpensive telescope, the Galileoscope, designed to offer magnification of between 25 and 50 times at a cost of just 15 dollars.

Launched by the American Astronomical Society, the Galileoscope has drawn a rave review from the US magazine Sky & Telescope for providing value-for-money skygazing for the young and poor.

In 1609, Galileo Galilei used a primitive telescope to discover spots on the Sun, craters and peaks on the surface of the Moon and four satellites orbiting Jupiter.

His findings confirmed Copernicus's theory that the planets orbited the Sun rather than the Earth -- but at the cost of incurring the wrath of the Roman Catholic Church by questioning its doctrine of celestial mechanics.

Galileo was convicted of heresy by the Inquisition and was forced to recant his findings to avoid being burned at the stake. He spent the last eight years of his life under house arrest.

In 1992, the Church admitted it had made an "error" and rehabilitated him.

Web links:

- www.100hoursofastronomy.org/
- www.astronomy2009.org/
- twitter.com/100Hours
- galileo.rice.edu/index.html

- www.galileoscope.org/gs/
- www.space.com/nightsky/

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Citation: World event hopes to lure 1 mln to astronomy (2009, April 2) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-04-world-event-lure-mln-astronomy.html>

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