

Poland pins hopes on starry-eyed students

January 1 2012, by Bernard Osser



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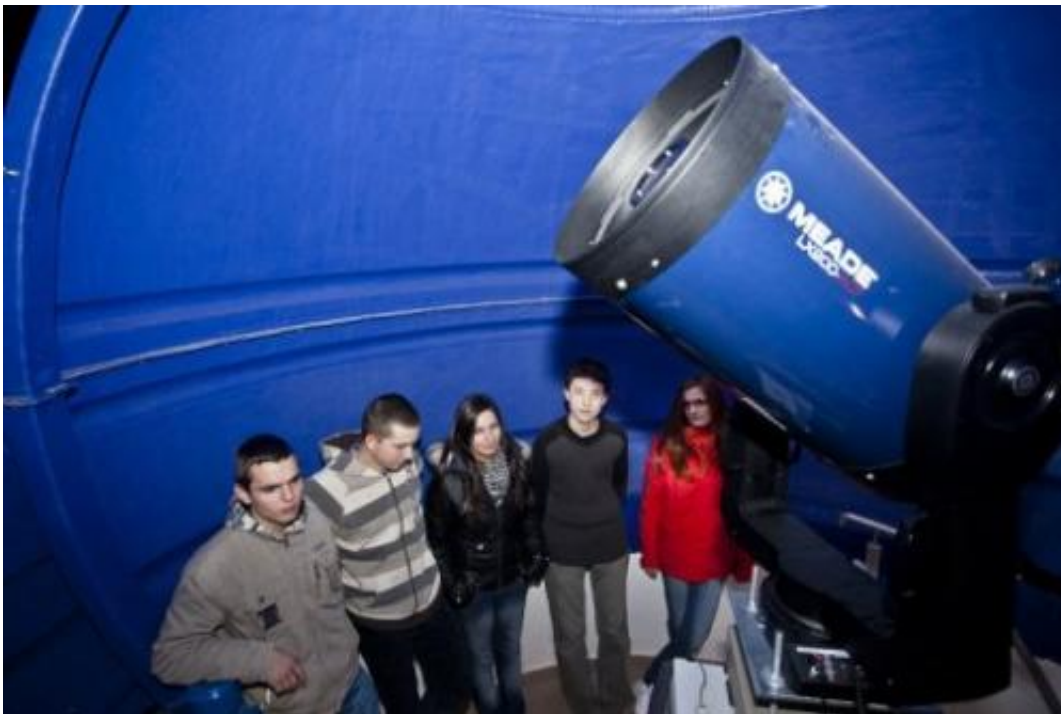
Starry-eyed youngsters living in the birthplace of Nicolas Copernicus have taken up celestial gazing like the father of modern astronomy, but using telescopes he could only dream of.

"Nicolas Copernicus inspired us greatly. He was born in Torun, so we wanted to create a programme that would do him justice," says

provincial councillor Piotr Calbecki of the project made possible by European Union funding and aimed at raising a new crop of scientists.

Six observatories have been built with eight more planned in the Torun region, where Copernicus (1473-1543) first looked to the heavens with only the [naked eye](#).

He became a pivotal figure of the Renaissance as the first-ever [astronomer](#) to put the Sun, rather than the Earth, at the centre of the Universe and is still regarded by his countrymen as their greatest scientific luminary.



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Painted blue and white, the new facilities have all the hallmarks of real cosmic observatories. Their copulas open up to the heavens for two telescopes. One is used to look at the Sun, while a second larger instrument is hooked up to computers programmed to train it on stars selected by students.

"First of all we choose a galaxy, then we click on the star we want to find and then after adjusting the [telescope](#) to the correct angle we can observe it," Sebastien Laser, a high school student, tells AFP.

Along with a dozen [classmates](#), Laser is spending the evening star-gazing in one of the computerized observatories, just a stone's throw from their school in the northern Polish village of Jablonowo.

Two teachers with a passion for astronomy run the project, dubbed "Astrobase", launched four years ago.

"Our goal is to popularize astronomy and the sciences and not just among youngsters. When the daily courses are over, the [observatory](#) is open to the local public too," says Rafal Laskowski, a physics teacher, especially trained at the nearby University of Torun to run the observatory.

It has become a centre for would-be astronomers. More than 30 local junior and senior high school student are enrolled in astronomy courses at the facility.



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Nearby schools organise field trips to the observatory and once a week it is open to the public.

The project "allows us to identify the most talented students at a young age and then give them the right training and the opportunity to pursue this exciting subject," says Barbara Bober, principal at the Jablonowo high school.

Another student from that school, Marta Jaworska, boasts of having recently observed a lunar eclipse. Even on cloudy evenings, she is happy to use the observatory's computers to learn more about the workings of the heavens.

"It's better than watching TV," Jaworska exclaims.

"I chose a completely different area of study at school, but I just love to come here and so why not explore this area more," she adds.

The price tag for the six observatories built so far is not astronomical with each facility costing under 100,000 euros (\$130,700).



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"EU funds allowed us to create something new, and it's in science, mathematics and physics that we would like to encourage and improve training in our region," Calbecki explains.

He has even more ambitious hopes for the project's future.

As clouds often blot out the stars in the skies over Poland, Calbecki wants to create an observatory in Peru or Argentina that would give Torun [youngsters](#) a glimpse of stars twinkling in the southern hemisphere.

"It would be linked to our observatories in Poland via the Internet and students could star gaze the year-round," he exclaims.

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Citation: Poland pins hopes on starry-eyed students (2012, January 1) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-01-poland-pins-starry-eyed-students.html>

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