

The night sky magic of the Atacama

January 11 2018, by Paul M. Sutter



Thousands of stars glitter in the black skies above the bone-dry desert of the Atacama in northern Chile. Credit: Universe Today

There's nothing an astronomer – whether professional or amateur – loves more than a clear dark night sky away from the city lights. Outside the glare and glow and cloud cover that most of us experience every day, the night sky comes alive with a life of its own.

Thousands upon countless thousands of glittering jewels – each individual star a pinprick of light set against the velvet-smooth blackness of the deeper void. The arching band of the Milky Way, itself host to billions more stars so far away that we can only see their combined light from our vantage point. The familiar constellations, proudly showing their true character, drawing the eye and the mind to the ancient tales spun about them.

There are few places left in the world to see the sky as our ancestors did; to gaze in wonder at the celestial dome and feel the weight of billions of years of cosmic history hanging above us. Thankfully the International Dark Sky Association is working to preserve what's left of the true [night sky](#), and they've rightfully marked northern Chile to preserve for posterity.

There, the Elqui Valley and the Atacama Desert host night skies impossible to see elsewhere. Away from cities, tucked between the Pacific coast and the high peaks of the Andes, the dry desert air and high elevations make for some of the best observing grounds you can find on Earth.



The ESO's Paranal Observatory sits proudly above the Atacama desert. Credit: Universe Today

Professional astronomers have taken advantage of this unique climate, constructing massive telescopes and vast arrays on the desolate mountain tops. From the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array to the ESO's Paranal Observatory, Chile is one of the most astronomically productive countries in the world, enabling us to peer into the hearts of galaxies and across the vast reaches of the universe itself.

But the beauty of the Chilean desert sky isn't reserved solely for professional use. In the past decades specialized resorts have sprung up across the Elqui and Atacama regions, allowing skywatching junkies, enthusiasts, and dreamers to sit in awe under the bowl of the heavens.

I'm personally incredibly passionate about sharing the wonders of

astronomy, so that's why I created AstroTours to let people from around the world experience science for themselves. And as soon as I got the company off the ground, I set my sights squarely on the Atacama.



The open-air observatory of the Alto Atacama resort provides a unique stargazing opportunity. Credit: Universe Today

In December 2018 I'm leading a small group to the Atacama, one of the driest places on Earth, so that every night we can sit in the open-air observatories (there's no need for a dome to block out light pollution here!) and enjoy the [night](#) sky in all its splendor. During the day we'll explore the alien and otherworldly nature of the Atacama itself, from the desiccated salt flats to the relaxing hot springs. It's all based at the [Alto](#)

[Atacama resort](#), tucked in the quiet town of San Pedro, Chile.

Source [Universe Today](#)

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