

SHINE ON

Our night skies are becoming increasingly obscured by light pollution. But there is a place in the Californian desert where you can wish upon a whole galaxy of stars.

By **Anna Liljemalm**
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*Twinkle twinkle
little star*



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Borrego Springs has long been known as a stargazing destination.

It's just before midnight. Fifty people sit with star charts in their hands, but it's hard to look anywhere but up. The night sky takes up all our attention. Thousands of stars wink at us, and the longer we look, the more we see. Most impressive is the band of stars in the Milky Way, which stretches across the entire sky like a silver cloud.

This is a stargazing festival in the small desert community of Borrego Springs in California. People from all over America have traveled here to look at the night sky. Astronomer Dennis Mammana tells tall tales and points out constellation after constellation above our heads. He names everything from the Big Dipper to the Great Bear and Orion.

We shouldn't take the names too literally, says Mammana. When we were growing up, we were taught that there were horses and bears in the sky. Many of us were frustrated when we couldn't find

them, but constellations require a lot of imagination. If you actually see a great bear up there, then there's something wrong with you.

The children and adults laugh. Mammana is used to standing in front of an audience. He has been arranging stargazing tours for a long time and he loves telling people about how the iron in our blood and the calcium in our bones was created inside stars. It's our very origins we're looking at up there. But then he turns serious. He advises us to take a good look, before it's too late.

As the world's cities grow bigger and brighter, the sky is disappearing bit by bit. A phenomenon that's known as light pollution. The light from street lamps, advertising signs, and cars destroys our ability to see the stars, even in a small town.

Borrego Springs is one of the few places in the world that still has a truly dark night sky. Ninety percent of the population of the Western world has never seen the

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Milky Way, Mammana says. It's heartbreaking. Truly heartbreaking. Here we can see it every night. Sometimes we forget that not everyone has that luxury.

Stargazing is said to have a soothing and calming effect on us. Many people describe how it gives them perspective and how their problems seem small under the vast starry sky.

The conditions at Borrego Springs are often, like tonight, perfect for stargazing. They have more than 300 clear nights a year here. The sky is also protected by the International Dark Sky Association. That means the sky must not be polluted by

excess light. Individuals and companies work together to minimize the amount of light.

People who come here will be completely shocked, Mammana says. They're not accustomed to such darkness. In the cities, there's light everywhere. People even walk around with light in their pockets.

Borrego Springs is located in one of the world's most densely populated regions. Los Angeles, Palm Springs, and San Diego are all just a couple of hours' drive away. But the 3,000m high mountains that surround the small desert village help block out the light pollution from its neighboring cities

People from all over America travel to Borrego Springs to look at the night sky.



The mountains also keep the rain away. The weather here is hot and sunny all year round. The dramatic desert landscape is frequently used in major movie productions and Hollywood is a regular visitor.

In the summer, it's so starry you can literally swim among the stars. The ones reflected in the swimming pools, that is. You can even make out the constellations in the water. For the more adventurous, tours are available where you can go out into the desert with a guide and sleep under the stars among the rattlesnakes, spiders, and other animals.

I had plenty to do even before Borrego Springs became a Dark Sky Community, says Mammana. We've been known as a good place for stargazing for a long time. Now interest has exploded and people are coming here from all over the world. It's really fantastic.

After tonight's lessons and stories have finished, the enthusiasts line up their telescopes in a row. Mammana lends his telescope to the beginners and points out planets, star clusters, and galaxies.

When most of the festival visitors have

gone, Mammana considers heading home himself, but then he has an idea. A short while later, he's leading us into the barren desert landscape with a flashlight in his hand. The best place for stargazing is a few kilometers outside the town, far from the nearest lamp post.

He's about to show us his favorite place. He tells us to be careful where we put our feet. Scorpions and black widows scuttle between the cacti. In the distance, we hear the howl of prairie dogs. A little way from the road he stops and tells us to look up. The starry sky is indescribably beautiful.

I never get tired of this, he says. But I admit that I'm worried about it. The darkness is under threat. Every time the cities glow, they shoot even more light up into the sky. I've noticed our skies getting brighter.

Tonight, we see five shooting stars. My mom used to tell me to make a wish when I saw a shooting star and I realize that I probably haven't done that since I was a kid. So I make my wishes tonight. Each time I see a star fall in Borrego Springs, I stop what I'm doing, close my eyes tight, and wish for everything I can think of. After all, who knows if I'll ever get the chance again. o



Astronomer Dennis Mammana at Borrego Springs.

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there's light everywhere. People even walk around with light in their pockets***

FIVE PLACES AROUND THE WORLD TO STARGAZE

When you start to run out of new destinations to see on this planet, maybe it's time to start looking elsewhere. Here are some places from which you can look unto other worlds.



Mt John Observatory, New Zealand

1 The rewards for climbing up Mount John are wonderful. They've been arranging stargazing tours here for tourists for a long time and the nearby town was quick to minimize the amount of excess light. The observatory is located on New Zealand's South Island. mtcooknz.com/mackenzie/stargazing

Yeongyang Firefly Eco Park, South Korea

→ Just outside Seoul is a valley that is home to millions of fireflies. Fireflies struggle to reproduce when they have to compete with electric lights, but the environment here is deliberately kept as dark as possible. Fireflies add an ex-

tra spice to the already beautiful starry skies.

np.yyg.go.kr

Zselic Starry Sky Park, Hungary

→ In many places in Europe it's difficult to find a really dark starry sky. Zselic Starry Sky Park in Hungary is one of the few exceptions. Tourists and amateur astronomers alike come here to gaze at the Milky Way and to study celestial phenomena.

darkskiesawareness.org

Pic Du Midi Observatory, France

2 Right next to the Spanish border, in the middle of the Pyrenees, you

can combine skiing and stargazing. During the winter months the ground is completely covered with snow. They have instruments here that monitor how the night skies change over time.

picdumidi.com

Aura Observatory, Chile

3 The Atacama desert is said to be the best place in the world for stargazing. It's where many astronomers conduct their research. Traditionally, it hasn't been possible to visit as a tourist, but now there are special observatories for curious members of the public.

aura-o.aura-astronomy.org