

SO YOU HAVE A TELESCOPE NOW – WHAT'S NEXT??

(a lot, if you follow the advice below & become a successful stargazer!)

It happens every year -- lots of folks, both young and old, find themselves in possession of a small telescope and their imagination is sparked at the chance of experiencing the Universe firsthand with their own eyes. They dream of savoring the remarkable sights in our striking New Mexico night sky that are just waiting to be explored with their new scope. Unfortunately, however, most often the new telescope ends up just sitting unused or just becoming an aggravation instead of a pleasure, and so the dream fades. Can you relate? If so, consider the obstacles that are in your way:

- 1) The manual provided (if any) is not adequate to really teach you how to effectively use the scope, much less understand how it works (ever tried to 'collimate' its optics?)
- 2) Even if you can operate the telescope, you can't really figure out where (and when) to point it so that you can see something worthwhile, like those neat objects shown on the telescope box (it's mostly just advertising hype – don't believe it!)
- 3) And if someone were to help you by pointing it at something neat in the sky, would you understand enough about what you're seeing to appreciate its beauty or significance? Could you find that object again later and explain it to your family or friends?

OK, enough about these typical problems. Your dream IS possible! Here's the answer to your predicament summarized in one sentence: *Find and make use of the abundant resources available to help you figure out that telescope, what it can see, where & when to aim it, and finally to truly understand & appreciate what you're seeing.*

So before you give up on that telescope & your dream, redirect your enthusiasm and readjust your expectations – don't expect to quickly see fantastic images like those in the magazines, way beyond what the laws of optics will allow for your small telescope. It takes a certain amount of knowledge to correctly use a telescope and appreciate what it reveals. This is true even for computerized Go-To scopes. Success comes by using the following resources:

- 1) “**GET IT IN PRINT**” – There are some ‘old-fashioned’ printed resources that can do wonders for your overall understanding of telescopes & the night sky. For a great all-in-one starter book, get Nightwatch, by Terence Dickinson – it's fun, easy, comprehensive, and even includes seasonal star charts (many experts use it!). Other good beginner guides are Turn Left at Orion, 365 Starry Nights, and Stars & Planets – just get something! (there's always Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble). In the way of magazines, either “Astronomy” or “Sky & Telescope” can be very useful, especially for telling you about current events & astronomical sights, with monthly sky charts and write-ups. Pick up a few issues of either one before you consider subscribing. Finally, consider getting a *planisphere* – a rotating star map that quickly reveals what's up at any time of year, great for learning to navigate the constellations. A fine example is “David Levy's Guide to the Stars”. All these printed resources are convenient but may be limited in their ability to answer your specific questions.
- 2) “**FIND IT ON THE INTERNET**” – There are gobs of web sites and discussion groups covering telescopes & astronomy that are convenient *and* specific, *IF* you're good at searching and filtering. Here are a few recommendations: as you might expect, the magazines mentioned above both have good web sites ([//skyandtelescope.com](http://skyandtelescope.com) & www.astronomy.com/), with specific areas for newcomers to astronomy. Check out [StarDate OnLine](http://StarDateOnLine.com) for all kinds of skywatching info. AstronomyDaily.com has an abundance of current info on many astronomical topics. For a jumping-off point to anything Astro-related, check

out AstronomyLinks.com. For two-way interaction, the astronomy & telescope forums at Yahoo! Groups are great for asking specific questions – there are many subscribers there who are glad to help a newcomer. Try [starrynights](#), [telescopes](#) or the group under [Telescopes](#) that caters to your specific brand of scope. Subscribe to the groups that appeal to *YOU*. The Web does contain gobs of detailed information, but often words & pictures are not adequate. What else is there? The most helpful resource for most new stargazers is... *Real people!*

- 3) “**LEARN IT FROM AN EXPERT**” – For help that’s quick, accurate, and fun, it’s hard to beat an experienced amateur astronomer who lives right here and is glad to share his or her knowledge. The local organization of amateurs is the [Astronomical Society of Las Cruces](#) (ASLC), and one of our goals is to help inexperienced telescope owners. This can take many forms: 1) interesting topics are presented & discussed at our monthly general meetings, which are open to anyone; 2) we share our telescopes & instruct folks about observing at public observing events (star parties); 3) we hold evening classes to teach the basics to beginners; 4) we present exciting programs to young students by working with teachers in local schools; 5) we do our best to provide practical help and advice to anyone seeking to purchase or fix telescopes or accessories (this is particularly valuable since our city has no stores to provide this service). Our web site is the best contact-point to connect you to all these services, mainly via [email](#). Remember, it’s more enjoyable & rewarding to share your interests with others of like mind, especially in your own town.

Here are some other valuable tidbits that can improve your observing success:

- Despite the title of this article, owning a telescope is NOT required to benefit from most of the suggestions contained herein. You can thoroughly enjoy stargazing, especially if you know your way around in the night sky, using just your bare eyes at a truly dark location. OR just take advantage of a proven fact – most astronomers are friendly folk who are more than willing to share their telescopes with others, so join them!
- Similarly, don’t forget to spend some time using your binoculars when you go out stargazing – with their erect image & wide field-of-view, they fit perfectly into the niche between viewing with naked eyes and viewing with a telescope, and thus are very helpful for finding your way amongst the stars. Actually, some amazing sights can ONLY be fully appreciated with binoculars!
- Strive to be patient & persistent, to develop an observer’s attitude – use every good opportunity to look skyward and increase your awareness of what’s up there to be seen. The sky holds frequent surprises for those who consistently look up!
- Most folks forget just how cold you can get standing or sitting still, watching the night sky, so take precautions to stay comfortable – warm clothes, gloves, head-coverings, and warm drinks help a lot. And consider buying or making a red-light flashlight (using red plastic film) so your dark-adapted eyes won’t be dazzled by the white light.
- Most of all, relax and have fun!! Amateur astronomy can and should be an easy-going, enjoyable hobby. Take it only as fast or as slow, as deep or as light, as is right for YOU.

And who knows – if you faithfully follow these guidelines, astronomy just might become a lifelong joy for you, too!

Happy stargazing!!

"Sharing the Universe With Our Community for Over 50 Years"

