

Guided Stargazing – A New Activity for Dark Sky Parks

07/01/2022

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Inspired by a trip to Mont Megantique in Canada with a group of researchers studying light pollution, lighting designer Etta Dannemann became fascinated by the dark sky movement. Five years later, she founded VISIT DARK SKIES, a publishing company that works with nature parks and dark sky hosts worldwide. With her Guided Stargazing concept, she offers travelers a new activity tailored to a personal encounter with the natural night sky. The concept relieves the parks and park hosts where stargazing guides are in short supply and offers hosts in remote regions the opportunity to earn additional income.

What is guided stargazing?

Guided stargazing involves lying on your back in a relaxed position and immersing yourself in the night sky for at least half an hour, observing the stars. An audio file guides your gaze and helps you experience the fascinating process of the eye's dark adaptation, which takes 30 minutes.

The audio file begins with stories about the Big Dipper and the Hubble telescope. Then a stargazing exercise helps you experience the stars in a new way: from one star to an entire perception of the sky, leading to an overwhelming awareness of the vastness and depth of the night.

With some questions about personal existence and some music at the end, the audio offers space to immerse yourself in the night sky, creating an intensely personal encounter with the night sky and a powerful memory.

Guided stargazing is tailored to couples or individuals, but can also be done in a group setting.

5 tips to make the most of it

- Do it in an area with dark skies
- Do it 300 feet away from trees and houses, with an unobstructed view of the horizon
- Make sure your neck is relaxed: Make yourself comfortable on a lounger/platform or chair
- Create warmth: blanket, hat, gloves, hot water bottles
- After turning on the smartphone sound, do not look in the direction of the phone to achieve full adaptation of the eye to the darkness.



Starry Sky Bench in

the Nossentiner / Schwinzer Heide,
Germany

The scientific background

The dark adaptation of the human eye has evolved over 100,000 years. There is a five-step process that the eye goes through when trying to capture as much light as possible. It does this by trading color perception and focusing during the day for contrast perception and farsightedness at night. This is done by adjustment of pupil dilation, chemical processes, the change of sensor groups in the eye. that together change the sensitivity of the eye. After 30 minutes, people with dark adaptation can see about twice as many stars as before when viewing in a dark sky location.

According to the International Dark-Sky Association, 80% of people in the United States live in a place where they

cannot see the Milky Way. Guided stargazing is a way to rediscover life in the dark.

How can dark sky parks offer this activity?

Nature parks can set up public wooden benches for stargazing. Specialized hosts and larger resorts can set up a space on their property for stargazing.

Guests use their smartphones to listen to the VISIT DARK SKIES audio guide and relax on the stargazing furniture or simply on the ground. Independent of a knowledgeable guide and set times, they can watch the stars as they appear, with flexibility.

The audio file was carefully developed with many pilot listeners and is tailored to the experience with timeless music, stories, and astronomical explanations. It can be licensed by Visit Dark Skies to be offered free of charge. Visitors can also purchase and stream it through the Visit Dark Skies website, with hosts as distributors. The audio file is available in English and German.



Photo credit:

Samuele Errico Piccarini

Parco Nazionale Foreste Casentinesi, Pratovecchio, Italy

Opportunity for dark sky activity hosts

Hosts can offer this unique service to interested guests by renting a special stargazing chair, blanket and hot water

bottle, and a speaker for groups, Comfort is an essential factor in making guided stargazing work well.

Etta Dannemann works with hosts in her workshop “How to Become a Dark Sky Host” to harness the potential of astro-tourism for themselves. VISIT DARK SKIES works with partners that show respect and sensitivity to the night sky, have night-friendly lighting, and offer nature-based but comfortable accommodations.



About the Author

Etta Dannemann is an architect and lighting designer living in Berlin, Germany. She founded VISIT DARK SKIES, a publishing company specializing in experiential products that explore light and darkness. She works with nature parks, dark sky hosts, and tourism operators in remote regions worldwide. She can be reached at etta@visitdarksities.com.

Learn More

- [Visit Dark Skies](#)
- [Watch Etta's recorded presentation](#) on her Guided Star Gazing audio tour, co-sponsored by Night Sky Science and the Colorado Plateau Dark Sky Cooperative during International Dark Sky Week, 2022.

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