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The background of the entire page is a night sky filled with stars. In the lower right foreground, there is a dark silhouette of a tree with many branches. At the bottom of the image, there is a thin, horizontal band of orange and yellow light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The title 'SCOTTSDALE SPACED OUT' is written in white text. 'SCOTTSDALE' is in a smaller, all-caps, sans-serif font. 'SPACED OUT' is in a much larger, bold, all-caps, sans-serif font.

SCOTTSDALE SPACED OUT

ONCE THE DESERT SUN HAS SET, THE ARIZONA CITY BECOMES A STAGE FOR SOME UNMISSABLE STARGAZING. PITCH UP FOR AN AFTER-DARK PICNIC AND SEE WHY SCOTTSDALE IS THE ULTIMATE DESTINATION FOR ASTRONOMERS

WORDS: FIONA TAPP



Fairy lights are strung across the hotel lawn, framed by giant saguaro cacti. Ordinarily it'd be a pretty sight, but tonight, the lights are switched off. Instead, three large telescopes, one wired to a computer, are arranged across the grass at the Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale to face the inky depths of the endless night sky. I've come to meet Mark Johnston — 'azastroguy' on Instagram — for a stargazing picnic, held between six and eight times a month at the hotel on the dusty fringes of the Sonoran Desert. Mark is one of 730 NASA-approved Solar System Ambassadors, and a self-described 'space nerd'.

"When I first found out about the ambassador programme in 2018, I thought 'I should be one,'" he says. Ambassadors like Mark share their passion for astronomy through a required minimum number of annual public education events like this. "By the first half of this year, I'd already done 60 events and the requirement is just to do four a year," says Mark. To become NASA approved, the Toronto native had to apply during the one-month open call, in which his knowledge and equipment were verified and his presentation skills evaluated. But these were hardly new skills for Mark, who first started giving astronomy presentations in Scottsdale over 25 years ago.

Keen to display his knowledge, he draws my attention to the Orion Nebula: what looks like a blurry, cottony swirl through the telescope is a detailed, blooming cloud of oranges, greens and blues on the computer screen. The light I'm seeing, Mark explains, left the nebula over 1,300 years ago. Just gazing at it makes me feel quite emotional; the scale is almost too much to comprehend. "It boggles the mind because every time you look up into the sky, you're literally looking back in time," Mark says.

The lack of light pollution here means the night sky stretches above me in all its dark, clear beautiful stillness. Views like these, warm nighttime temperatures and the fact it's home to certified Dark Sky Communities make Scottsdale a magnet for space enthusiasts. Mark tells me that when he's not hosting space-themed events at the resort or nearby Pinnacle Peak Park, he often takes his telescope to Cave Creek or Needle Rock, a short drive from the hotel, where the skies are even darker.

But Mark's not the only one starry-eyed over Scottsdale's night sky. Scott Adams is part of a local team of five astronomy enthusiasts



and educators dubbed the 'Star Dudes'. They meet weekly at the Adero Scottsdale hotel, in the nearby town of Fountain Hills, which was designated an International Dark Sky Community in 2018. "We brought our telescopes and set up on the lawn behind the hotel," he says. "People from the hotel started referring to us as 'those star dudes'. It rolled off the tongue, so that's what we became."

The Adero hosts its stargazing events from its Skytop Lounge, an outdoor cocktail bar with unobstructed views of the McDowell Mountains. There are galactic-themed cocktails on offer, including the milky way, a creamy concoction of salted caramel bourbon, hazelnut, amaro and espresso. The Adero serves celebratory tipples, too — in December 2020, during an event to witness the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn in the Great Conjunction, there was a marriage proposal beneath the stars. It's special moments like these that Scott enjoys so much. "A 12-year-old girl also told me she wanted to work for NASA when she grew up. She had really good questions, better than most adults," he laughs.

Part of what makes Scottsdale — and Fountain Hills, in particular — so good for stargazing are the light ordinances (rules

to minimise light pollution) required for its status as a certified Dark Sky Community. You won't find any street-lamps in Fountain Hills, for example. Geography helps, too. The neighbourhood is largely hemmed in by the McDowell Mountains, while the sparsely populated Native American reservations of Yavapai and Salt River Pima-Maricopa nearby mean light pollution is minimal in all directions. "If you're standing at the Skytop Lounge and look over the town, there are vast areas that just don't have any light," says Scott.

He's also part of the fundraising movement for the creation of the town's International Dark Sky Discovery Center, which will feature an observatory, planetarium and 'immersion zone'. It's hoped the planned opening in 2024 will further cement the region as a top spot for astronomy tourism.

Back at the Four Seasons, Mark shows me his prized possession: a real meteorite. Dull and grey, the rock fits easily into the palm of my hand, but it's heavy. It's only when Mark reveals its age that I realise how significant it is. "That's the oldest thing you will ever hold in your life," he says. "It's 4.6 billion years old, and was floating around in space millions of years before our planet was even formed." □

Previous pages: Dark skies over the Sonoran Desert. The lack of light pollution in and around Scottsdale makes it a magnet for astrotourists

Above: Sunset over the Phoenix and Scottsdale urban area

HOW TO DO IT

British Airways flies direct from Heathrow to Phoenix. [ba.com](https://www.ba.com)

Stargazing events are available free of charge to guests at the Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale at Troon North, and to both guests and the public at the Adero Scottsdale.

Doubles at Four Seasons Resort Scottsdale from \$209 (£171), room only. [fourseasons.com](https://www.fourseasons.com)

Doubles at Adero Scottsdale from \$149 (£138), room only. [aderoscottsdale.com](https://www.aderoscottsdale.com)

MORE INFO

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