

Observing Mars with the naked eye is worth waiting for. From where we are standing we can see Mars even better with our own eyes or with a telescope during a time period known as "Mars close approach". Mars Missions of the future will likely happen during this time, when Mars and Earth are exceptionally close to each other. Exceptional Mars travel, in part, means timing the journey just right. Fortunately, we get this opportunity something like every two years when Mars and Earth expect to dance closest to each other in their orbits. As it goes, super special close encounters are exceptionally rare and this is also true for Earth and Mars. Bold bending of the rules is atypical for planetary patterns, but Mars' and Earth's elliptical orbit around the Sun allow them to meet a little extra close on special occasions. Mars and Earth were never as close to each other as they were in 2003 - a "close approach" that hadn't occurred in, lo and behold... 60,000 years before that! And they won't be this close again until 2287.