



SILENT NIGHT

The stars above the city offer solace and wonder, as these images of Richmond Park show. But you don't have to be an astrophysicist to enjoy them. Simply take the time to look up. By Alice Wright

Photographs by Alex Saberi

Astronomy compels the soul to look upwards and leads us from this world to another,' said Plato. If the philosopher looked to the stars for respite from the scholarly world of ancient Greece, one can only imagine the solace they might offer him were he living in the rush and bustle of London today.

At this time of year city life can become a whirl of tinsel-draped shops and brightly lit bars heaving with festive revellers, leaving little time for quiet contemplation. But long winter nights are the perfect time to look up and marvel at the wonders of the universe spread out in the darkness. Those bright pinpricks, some of them billions of years old and thousands of light years away, help remind us of our own insignificance in the grander scheme of things. And, in the midst of Christmas overindulgence or the bleak January that invariably follows, that thought can be strangely uplifting.

As Will Gater, features editor at *Sky at Night Magazine* explains, stargazing is a magical experience, even for the

city-dwelling beginner. 'To me there's nothing better than wrapping up warm and going out to gaze up at the night sky on a crisp winter's evening,' he says. 'Stargazing really feels like an adventure at this time of year – more so, I think, than during the summer months. Winter's a great time to get out stargazing, as the nights are long and dark, and the constellations that are visible at this time of year are rich in celestial objects to look at.'

The constellations that are visible change month by month, and the winter sky is full of bright stars and some of their most recognisable configurations. 'You can't fail to spot the bright stars in the constellations of Orion, Gemini, Auriga and Taurus,' says Will. 'All of these constellations have a wealth of objects in them to look for too, such as star clusters and nebulae [glowing gas clouds].'

Although astronomy may seem like a hobby that requires expensive equipment and a degree in astrophysics, Will insists that this simply isn't the case. 'You can start enjoying the night sky with no equipment whatsoever,' he says. 'From a site with dark

skies there's so much to see with just the naked eye. A good pair of binoculars is really useful too. They'll reveal star clusters, the brighter nebulae and some of the brighter galaxies.

'Even from a city there's lots to see with only a small telescope. As for learning about the night sky, that's the fun of going out observing. You slowly learn bit by bit, and before long you'll be thinking of the constellations as old friends.'

And even without a telescope or binoculars, the brightest stars and planets are visible with the naked eye from London parks and gardens. You may even spot the International Space Station passing by.

To give yourself the best chance of seeing them, you'll need to get away from the glare of street lamps and other artificial lighting. Back gardens provide some of the darkest places in the city, especially when trees and bushes block out nearby street lights. So you may not even need to leave the grounds of your home – just wrap up warm and take a reclining chair or rug

outside so you can lie back comfortably.

Allow your eyes about half an hour to adjust to the darkness – you will find you can gradually see more. The star charts printed in *Sky at Night Magazine* are a useful way to navigate round the night sky, as they are tailored for the specific month in question.

If you don't have a garden, the Royal Parks are also good places to find relatively dark skies, as they have low-level lighting as a matter of policy.

And if you want to take your stargazing to the next level there are a number of astronomy groups in and around London.

The Baker Street Irregular Astronomers meet once a month at The Hub in Regent's Park, which is free, informal and open to all. Some telescopes are provided and members are on hand to give advice on stargazing in the city. The group was set up in the summer of 2010 and numbers are steadily growing, showing that the capital is full of fledgling astronomers who just need a little encouragement to see the



wonders that await them in the skies above.

The West of London Astronomical Society, which also strongly encourages interested amateurs, holds regular observing events for members at its own dark-sky site in High Wycombe, about half an hour's drive from west London. It also meets once a month at sites in Uxbridge and Harrow. However, the society's David Arditti explains that many members practise astronomy from their back gardens in London. 'There are always bright objects in the sky,' he says. 'Jupiter is very high in the sky at midnight at the moment and the moon is always visible, which is fascinating for people to look at with binoculars or a small telescope.'

Although light pollution is a real problem in the city, David says there are some measures that members of the public can take to better enjoy the night sky. If a street light is casting a glare into your back garden you can speak to your council, which may be able to make alterations to prevent this. Councils have a legal duty to enforce against light pollution, so if you think a nearby property is lit up excessively at night you can raise this with them. You can also seek advice from the British Astronomical Association's Campaign for Dark Skies.

Stargazing in London has recently been given a boost by the launch of the Dark Sky Discovery England project, which has produced a network of Dark Sky Discovery Sites where people can enjoy the stars at their clearest. These include the WaterWorks Nature Reserve in Lee Valley Regional Park, east London.

In January the West of London Astronomical Society will be hosting public observing sessions at Ruislip Lido in north-west London, to coincide with the BBC's series of *Stargazing Live* programmes.

Throughout winter the Hampstead Observatory on Hampstead Heath is also open to the public on Friday and Saturday evenings when the sky is clear.

So Londoners have a wealth of astronomical resources available to them, and this is only right given the significant scientific role that the city has played in exploring the heavens. 'London was a hugely important place for astronomy historically, due to the presence of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich,' Will explains. 'In many ways London was at the very heart of the astronomical world.'

And while the observatory is still a fascinating place to visit, Will maintains that it's equally enriching just to take some time to look up at the stars above us.

'Stargazing has a wonderful calming effect and brings a tremendous sense of perspective to the world around you. So to me it's really important to maintain that link between the night sky and us, whether you live in the city or not.'

