

Dark Skies

Valerie Stimac

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Most human beings live with light pollution; in the US, 99 percent of people exist under blank skies, drenched in artificial light. But when you travel to dark sites, you “fill that blankness with the entire universe above you.” If seeing into infinity appeals to you, then Valerie Stimac’s *Dark Skies* is an ideal travel guide.

Stimac’s guide insists that the sky’s “magnificence can be even more overwhelming than terrestrial wonders.” Her recommendations begin at home, with observing constellations, the Milky Way, planets, and the Andromeda Galaxy on clear nights, and then skip between thirty-five designated dark sky sites around the world. Celestial phenomena, from the auroras to eclipses and meteor showers, are also a feature, as is a meditation on the future of space tourism.

In its presentations of dark sky parks and reserves where clear views of the night sky are consciously preserved, as well as places so far from civilization that light pollution is not an issue, the book also includes need-to-know information such as the best time of year to visit and the dates of the next major celestial events.

Bolivia boasts sunset and stargazing tours on its salt flats, and parks in Germany, Iceland, and Israel also make the list. If you’re visiting Warrumbungle National Park, choose a date in Australia’s spring to catch the wildflowers, too. Astrotourists will be interested in a section that focuses on observatories, gesturing toward Chile and stays in observatory-adjacent geodesic domes, and to the McDonald Observatory and its star parties in the West Texas mountains.

In holding up these distant and preserved places where it’s possible to be in touch with the stars much in the way that our ancestors were, Stimac encourages both exploration and a spirit of conservation. Her eyes-upward trip around the planet is an exercise in awe with an eye toward the future.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2019)

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