



# OUT OF THIS WORLD

*Astrotourism is headed for the stratosphere as more travellers look to the sky for their next adventure. From solar eclipses to the Northern Lights, astrotourism not only offers a unique and awe-inspiring experience but also contributes to the preservation of dark sky areas and supports local economies*

WORDS BY **LEO BEAR**





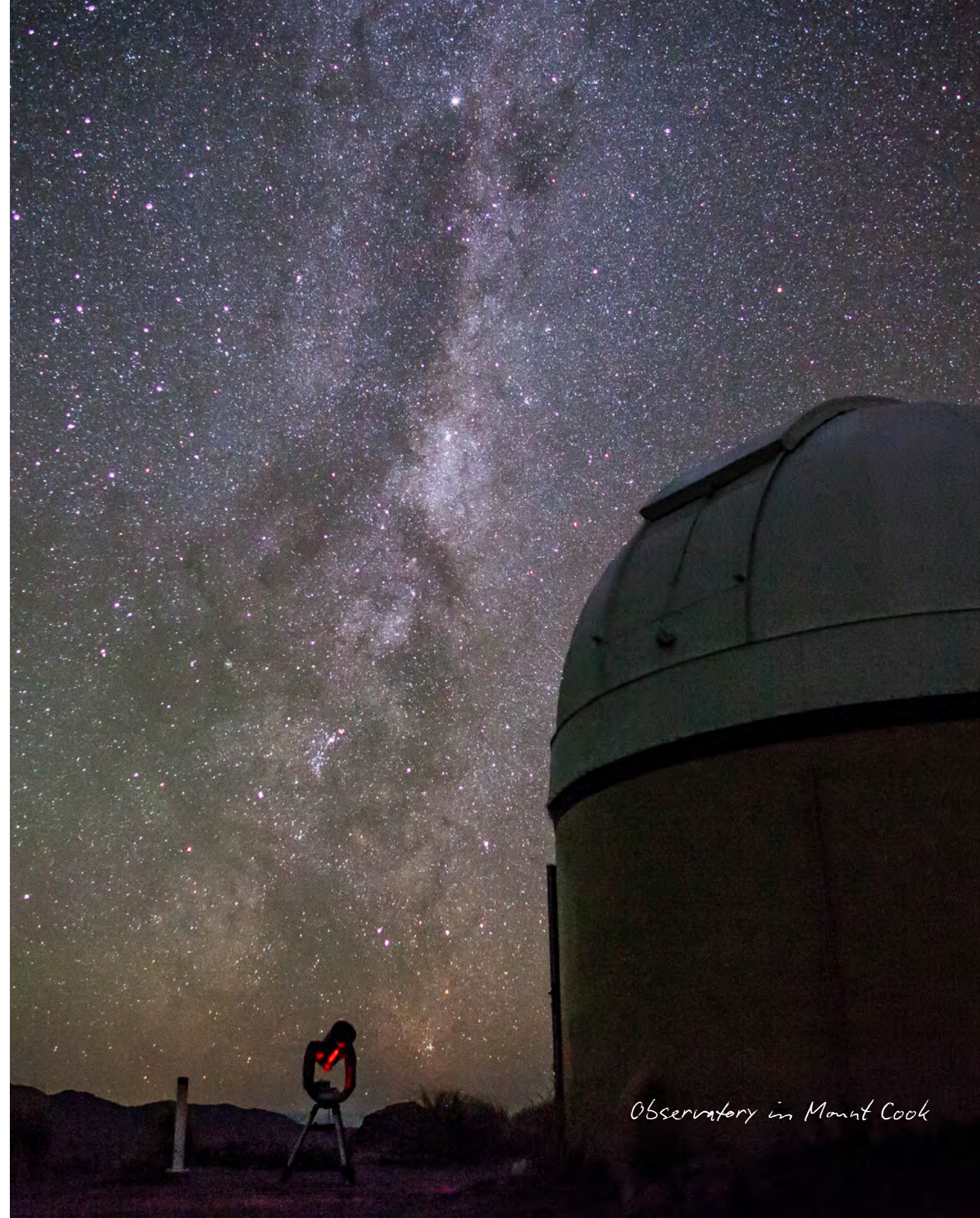
*Solar eclipse*



*Atacama desert*

**ON 8 APRIL**, from 1:32pm to 1:41pm Central Standard Time, a total solar eclipse was visible across a narrow margin of Mexico, the USA and Canada. The privileged few who signed up to a bespoke tour with luxury travel company Pelorus were escorted to a private camp in a remote corner of Texan Hill Country to hone their tomahawk-throwing skills before a professional astronomer arrived on site with a state-of-the-art telescope. The 'star party' that ensued went on late into the night but was only the prelude to the main event, which unveiled itself at dawn when the birds stopped singing, the insects stopped buzzing and the skies darkened. The group donned protective eyewear as a 'ring of fire' formed around the moon, witnessing the eclipse from the ultimate vantage point. The days that followed involved helicopters, all-terrain-vehicles and clay-pigeon shooting, but speak to any one of them today and it is that profound moment on the hill that remains etched in their memories. Herein lies the power of astrotourism. It's about experiencing something bigger than us – something out of this world.

Gazing up at the night sky is nothing new. The universe has provided mankind with awe and wonder for millennia (see Halley's Comet etched onto the Bayeux tapestry in 1066) and now more than ever, travellers are craving the celestial. Online searches for 'astronomical holidays' has gone up by 40 percent and National Geographic estimates roughly four million people will travel in the next 12 months for reasons relating to the cosmos. Be it for a solar eclipse, a meteor storm or a moon-bow, luxury hotels are responding with ever-more creative after-dark experiences such as canopy beds set up under starry skies, Michelin-star midnight feasts and star tours led by expert astronomers. Take, for example, Soneva Secret, a brand-new 14-villa resort



*Observatory in Mount Cook*





*The Black Diamond*

in the Maldives. Among the resort's earliest investments was a set of Unistellar eVscope 2 telescopes that can be wheeled to guest villas for the ultimate cosmic date night.

"The magic of such experiences lies in their simplicity," says Alex Chaplin, chief operating officer at Time + Tide, a pioneering luxury safari company with camps spread across Africa. "A sleep-out in the heart of the South Luangwa National Park in Zambia takes you back to the days of early explorers. It provides people with an opportunity to reconnect with nature and with each other in a meaningful way. Complete privacy in an untouched environment is the very definition of luxury today." Understandilby, a mesmerising night sky is a sure-fire way to get someone to look up from their phone and enjoy nature at its absolute finest.

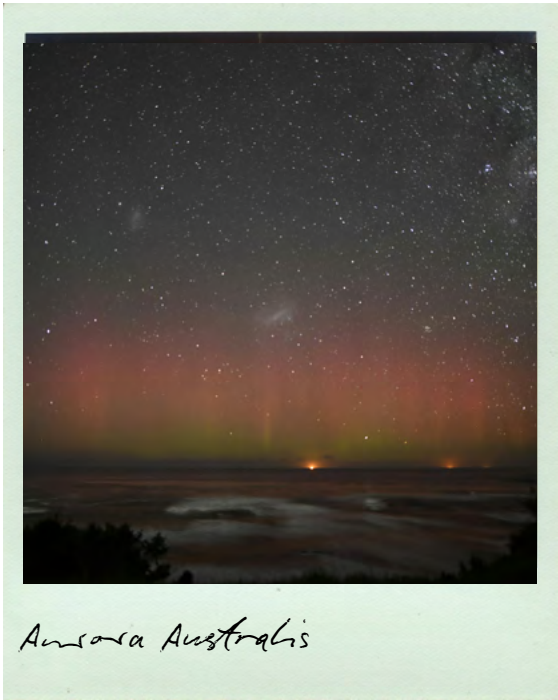
"Seeing a pristine unpolluted night sky with the Milky Way arching across it or the majesty of a total solar eclipse is something that sears itself into your memory," says Professor Robert Massey, deputy executive director of London's Royal Astronomical Society and leader of eclipse tours in Iran, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Turkey and the Arctic. "It reminds us of our own insignificance... and something I've noticed is that people who've witnessed something celestial, only go on to want more."

Light pollution is, of course, the enemy. According to the journal Science, artificial lighting is brightening our skies by 10 percent each year and with 80 percent of the world's skies already suffering light pollution, dark skies are increasingly becoming highly sought-after destinations. There are currently just over 200 certified Dark Sky places in 22 countries, and it will come as no surprise to learn the Atacama Desert in Chile tops the list. Thanks to its high altitude, very little light pollution and largely cloud-free nights, it's possible to





Aoraki, New Zealand



Aorara Australis



Citrusdal, South Africa

see nebulae (clouds of gas and dust), star clusters and entire galaxies with the naked eye (or even better with a set of binoculars). The key thing, says Massey, is to visit around a new moon (the phase when it's at its least bright) because light from the moon washes out the fainter stars.

New Zealand's Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park is another destination with a gold-standard Dark Sky reserve. In terms of soaking up the southern skies in style, Mt Cook Lakeside Retreat's Billion Star dining experience begins with a six-course dinner followed by a visit to the Pukaki Observatory which doubles as a cellar. From time to time, guests are treated to a vivid display of electric-pink aurora australis (Southern Lights) while sipping their refreshments.

Venturing east? Consider a detour to Iriomote-Ishigaki National Park, Japan's first Dark Sky Park, located within the Yaeyama Islands in the south-west of Okinawa prefecture. As well as extraordinary night skies, these remote tropical islands are ringed by healthy coral reefs and are home to a species of critically endangered wild cat. Closer to home, AIUla recently earned itself Dark Sky certification. Gharameel, about an hour from the city centre, is the best place to appreciate spectacular night vistas thanks to its towering rock pillars.

"Next year (2025) is a sunspot maximum, meaning a lot of activity on the Sun and higher odds of material being ejected towards the Earth resulting in geomagnetic storms," says Massey. In layman's terms, that means we're likely to see strong displays of aurora borealis (Northern Lights). Iceland, northern Scandinavia, Greenland, Canada and Alaska are all excellent destinations to see them from but of course, despite what the forecasting apps will tell you, there's no knowing exactly when they'll make an appearance.



There are a few dates you can mark in your diary, though. The Quadrantids meteor shower will be at its peak 2-3 January yielding 60 to 70 shooting stars an hour (best viewed from the northern hemisphere). On 16 January, Mars will be at its closest to Earth and directly opposite the Sun, making it especially bright and visible anywhere in the northern hemisphere. A total lunar eclipse will be visible 13-14 March (best viewed from the Americas) and also 7-8 September (best viewed from Asia, Australia and east Africa). And in mid-December, the Geminids meteor shower will rain down with up to 120 bright and colourful meteors per hour (best viewed in Europe and West Africa).

If it's a total solar eclipse you're holding out for, similar to what the merry gang in Texas experienced, you'll need to wait a bit longer. The next one isn't due until August 12, 2026. That being said, travel companies are already taking bookings. Natural World Safaris' small ship cruise to Greenland – where two to three minutes of totality is expected – is nearly sold out. Rest assured, the eclipse will be visible in other parts of the world, just not for as long.

A final word on astrotourism. Like any other form of eco-travel, observing the night sky requires treading carefully. The last thing these remote Dark Sky places need is swarms of people turning up and shining LED lights from their phones. To observe best practice, avoid flash photography, respect quiet hours and leave no trace behind you. Future generations deserve to enjoy the brilliance of a starlit sky; let's not ruin the best show on earth.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, Halley's Comet (last seen in 1986) is due to blaze a return in 2061. Hopefully see you then.

*AlUla, Saudi Arabia*