

The world's top 10 star parties

Want to go away in the company of other astronomy enthusiasts? **Anton Vamplew** rounds up the world's top events

Whether you're a complete astro-novice or a seasoned amateur, star parties are a great choice of holiday. After all, how often do you get the chance to tell tales, swap equipment and socialise with other astronomy enthusiasts – possibly even in the most far-off places, if you're really adventurous?

If that's not enough of an enticement in itself, star parties are, for self-evident reasons, held in corners of the world with clear skies, where light pollution isn't a problem. Most people are willing to share their knowledge, skills and equipment, so you get the chance to use a great variety of telescopes to see some amazing sights.

Grand Canyon Star Party USA

- **DATE:** June 2007
- **LOCATION:** North and South Rim, Grand Canyon, Arizona
- **COST:** Camping from £2 (US\$15) per night, lodges from around £40 (US\$30) per night
- **WWW:** tucsonastronomy.org/gcsp.html
- **GETTING THERE:** Car from Flagstaff, Las Vegas or Phoenix

Here's a party with great skies, well away from any lights – Flagstaff is the nearest major town, but even that's 130km (80 miles) away. There are no organised daytime events, but this is because the Grand Canyon will grab your attention when you're not looking up at night. You might also consider outings to the popular tourist haunts of Lowell Observatory, Meteor Crater and Monument Valley.

Texas Star Party USA

- **DATE:** May 2007
- **LOCATION:** Prude Ranch, off Highway 118, six miles northwest of Fort Davis, Texas
- **COST:** Registration is £50 (US\$100) per adult; camping from £5 (US\$9.25) per night; lodges from £30 (US\$56) per night
- **WWW:** www.texasstarparty.org
- **GETTING THERE:** Car from Midland/Odessa or El Paso

Some of the darkest skies in the USA are in the Davis Mountains, West Texas. For UK observers, you have the chance to observe the globular cluster Omega Centauri while mingling with astronomers who fit in nicely with the Texas moniker of 'the Big State'. With more than 500 attendees, there are plenty of talks, tours and ranch activities.

Starfest Canada

- **DATE:** August 2007
- **LOCATION:** The River Place campground, 14km (8.5 miles) north of Mount Forest, Ontario
- **COST:** Registration from £25 (CA\$40) plus £6 (CA\$14) per night camping fee
- **WWW:** www.nyaa.ca
- **GETTING THERE:** Car from Toronto airport

The North York Astronomical Association's Starfest is Canada's largest annual star party, attracting almost 1,000 astronomers. With a good range of daylight activities such as workshops and lectures, it's dedicated to keeping everyone happy and will appeal to experienced observers, astrophotographers and anyone new to the hobby alike.

Winter Star Party USA

- **DATE:** February 2008
- **LOCATION:** Camp Wesumkee, Florida Keys, Florida
- **COST:** Registration around £40 (US\$75); camping around £30 (US\$60)
- **WWW:** www.scas.org/wsp.htm
- **GETTING THERE:** Car from Key West or Miami airports

The Winter Star Party is hosted by the Southern Cross Astronomical Society during the new Moon week each February. It typically attracts amateur astronomers from around the world, keen to travel to the warm sub-tropics of the Florida Keys. Activities include guest speakers, photo contests, mirror-grinding lessons and a popular 'Kids Kamp'. And yes, you certainly will be able to see the Southern Cross.

Southern Skies Star Party Bolivia

- **DATE:** July 2007
- **LOCATION:** Inca Utama Hotel and Alapacha Amateur Observatory, Lake Titicaca, Bolivia
- **COST:** £900 (US\$1,749) includes flights from Miami, hotel, all food, daily water and star party activities
- **WWW:** www.sssp.org/SouthernSkies
- **GETTING THERE:** Flight from Miami then bus transfer

Observing on the banks of Lake Titicaca at 4km (12,300ft) makes this one of the highest-altitude star parties in the world. With most of the weather down below, you can be sure of clear, stable seeing and plenty of southern starry-sky glories. You do need to wrap up warm at night, and there's the thin air to consider, but this is an outstanding venue.

Equinox Star Party UK

- **DATE:** September 2007 and April 2008
- **LOCATION:** Kelling Heath Leisure Park, Weybourne, Norfolk
- **COST:** Camping from £16 per night
- **WWW:** www.starparty.org
- **GETTING THERE:** The Kelling Heath train halt is at the campsite; this is on the Poppy line running diesel and steam engines from the main national stop at Sheringham

This event is in two parts: there's a small weekend party in April and a larger, almost two-week observing bonanza in September. The September event may have a trade stand or two, but the focus is very much on observing and socialising in what has become one of the largest events of its kind in the UK and across Europe.

Kielder Star Camp UK

- **DATE:** October 2007
- **LOCATION:** Kielder campsite, Kielder Forest, Northumberland
- **COST:** Camping from £10 per night
- **WWW:** www.richarddam.demon.co.uk/starcamp
- **GETTING THERE:** Train from Carlisle

This event is organised by the Kielder Observatory Astronomical Society, and is supported by the Forestry Commission and Sunderland Astronomical Society. It's located in one of Britain's officially least light-polluted locations. Daytime activities happen at the nearby Kielder Castle – here you'll find speakers, suppliers and workshops. Keep your eye on the trees too, as the forest is home to England's biggest colony of red squirrels.

Swiss Star Party Switzerland

- **DATE:** August 2007
- **LOCATION:** Gurnigel Pass, south of Bern and west of Thun
- **COST:** No registration or camping fees. Hotel accommodation from £25 (58 Swiss francs) per night
- **WWW:** www.teleskoptreffen.ch/starparty/index.en.php
- **GETTING THERE:** Car from Bern airport

Up in the Bernese Alps sits an abandoned tank-firing platform – this is where the Swiss Star Party takes place. The views of the surrounding mountains are enough to make the word 'scenic' seem like an understatement. The nights here are wonderfully dark, so seeing naked-eye stars down to below mag. +6.5 is easy. There are no daytime events, but you'll spend most of your spare time taking pictures of the scenery.

Queensland Astrofest AUS

- **DATE:** August 2007
- **LOCATION:** Lions Camp, Duckadang, Linville, two hours northwest of Brisbane, Queensland
- **COST:** Registration costs £8 (AU\$19.50) for one day, and £40 (AU\$97.50) for six days
- **WWW:** www.qldastrofest.org.au
- **GETTING THERE:** Car from Brisbane airport

This is the major star party for Queensland, run collaboratively by many local astronomical societies. During the day there are guest speakers and workshops on equipment, tools and techniques, and an awards ceremony. There is also a swimming pool, a mini-golf course, an adventure trail and you can go canoeing in the Brisbane River.

South Pacific Star Party Aus

- **DATE:** April 2008
- **LOCATION:** Wiruna, near Ilford, about three hours west of Sydney in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales
- **COST:** Registration from £20 (AU\$55); no extra camping fees
- **WWW:** [asnsw.com](http://www.asnsw.com)
- **GETTING THERE:** Car from Sydney airport

The Astronomical Society of New South Wales hosts the South Pacific Star Party at its 0.4km² (107-acre) country property out in the bush. There are daytime workshops and lectures, and evening events including sky tours for those new to stargazing. The place is also a paradise for nature lovers, with an abundance of colourful native Australian birds, brush and ringtail possums, wombats and a resident family of kangaroos.