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Planet's Biggest Telescope Coming to Hawai'i's Big Island

Maunakea reconfirms its role as Earth's stellar site for astronomy

Hawai'i's Big Island – Stargazers were delighted, but not surprised, to hear the recent news that the summit of 13,796-foot volcano, **Maunakea**, on Hawai'i's Big Island has been chosen as the future home of the world's most powerful astronomical telescope.

The "Thirty-Meter Telescope" is slated to begin searching the stars as early as 2018. But savvy stargazing travelers know that the summit of Maunakea is already the world's pre-eminent site for studying the heavens – and for astronomy tourism. Thanks to Maunakea's elevation, its pure, dry, calm air here in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and its lack of light pollution, the volcano is home to 13 world-class telescopes. In July, after an Australian backyard astronomer noticed that the planet Jupiter had been struck by a comet or asteroid, it was pictures from infrared and optical telescopes on Maunakea that were flashed around the world.

Two of those are the twin W.M. Keck Observatory telescopes, currently the world's most powerful eyes into deep space. In infrared wavelengths, they are on a par with the orbiting Hubble telescope. The Kecks' light-gathering mirrors are each 10 meters in diameter. The Thirty-Meter Telescope's mirrors will have nine times the light-collecting area.

Like other astronomical telescopes, The "TMT" will be a sort of time machine. Because light from the far reaches of the universe takes so long to make its way to planet Earth, stellar events seen from here actually took place (to paraphrase George Lucas) a long, long time ago in galaxies far, far away. The TMT will allow us to peer some 13 billion light-years into deep space, opening a window onto the formative events not long after The Big Bang when our universe was born about 13.5 to 14 billion years ago.

Contemplating such mind-boggling matters is especially dazzling while standing on the sometimes snowy summit of Maunakea, with a massive observatory behind you, gazing at a sky

full of impossibly bright stars. And it's nice to know that you can fall asleep that night to the sound of lapping waves at a beachside resort.

Several renowned tour companies take guests up to the frosty 13,796-foot summit for stargazing adventures. But first they stop at the 9,300-foot **Onizuka Center for International Astronomy** – for viewing through portable telescopes (including a day-time solar telescope with protective filters), learning about the ancient tradition of astronomy in Hawai'i, and exploring the visitors center, sipping hot drinks and perusing the books, DVDs and posters for sale. The center is open to the public every day from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., and has a free stargazing program every night from 6 to 10. <http://www.ifa.hawaii.edu/info/vis/stargazing.html>

There's still more excitement for space geeks down closer to sea level. Astronomy has played an important part in Hawai'i since the first Polynesian voyagers used the stars to find their way here some 1,600 years ago. You can learn the story of these amazing navigators at the **'Imiloa Astronomy Center** in Hilo. Its planetarium and hands-on exhibits, with written material in Hawaiian and English, show the past, present and future of astronomy on Hawai'i Island. www.imiloahawaii.org.

And if that wasn't enough, there are also great **stargazing programs at Big Island resorts**, including The Fairmont Orchid, Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel and Hilton Waikoloa Village Resort. (http://www.stargazehawaii.com/Stargazing_Sessions.php). Kona Village's stargazing evenings feature internationally acclaimed astronomy artist Jon Lomberg, who collaborated with renowned astronomer Carl Sagan on his book, *Cosmos*, and on the film from his book *Contact*. Lomberg even has an asteroid named after him.

Special note to media: The Big Island Visitors Bureau (BIVB) recognizes the use of the 'okina ['] or glottal stop, one of the eight consonants of the modern Hawaiian language; and the kahakō [ā] or macron (e.g., in place names of Hawai'i such as Kīlauea). However, BIVB respects the individual use of these markings for names of organizations and businesses.

For more information on Hawai'i's Big Island, please visit <http://gohawaii.com/big-island>

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