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The Best Spots to Stargaze Into Arizona's Night Sky

Peer into the Perseid Meteor Shower and more galactic views.

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A starry sky in Flagstaff, Arizona. | Geoffrey Hunt/Getty Images

STAR
tripping

John Denver, for his hit song “Rocky Mountain High,” sang “I’ve seen it rainin’ fire in the sky / The shadow from the starlight is softer than a lullaby” after watching the Perseid meteor shower. This weekend—in the mountains, valleys, and parks of Arizona—you, too, can gain

your own inspiration watching the annual Perseid meteor shower over Arizona scatter as many as one-hundred or more “shooting stars” per hour at its peak.

Astronomy geeks (like myself) curious about the cause of the Perseid meteor shower can check with [NASA](#) to find that the meteors are actually small rocks, debris thrown off by the comet Swift-Tuttle that orbits the sun every 133 years. Earth passes through this debris cloud every August, with the burning rocks lighting up the sky in front of the constellation Perseus, hence the name.

“This is kind of one of the go-to meteor showers to see,” says Kevin Schindler, historian at Flagstaff’s Lowell Observatory. And it’s easy to watch. “Just grab a recliner, lie down, and look up,” laughs Schindler, “it really is pretty simple.”

The meteor shower is currently ongoing, lasting until August 24, peaking just after midnight on Saturday, August 12, with prime viewing time 1 to 2 am Arizona time until dawn on August 13. This year’s display should be even more vivid because the moon will be a small waning crescent this weekend, keeping the skies dark.

No binoculars, telescope or star maps are necessary to enjoy the show. You will, however, want to find a dark place away from ambient city lights to best see the meteors. Fortunately, Arizona, even around the Phoenix area, has plenty of “dark sky” locations from which to gain a great perspective. (There’s even [a new resort](#) certified by the Dark Sky powers that be.)

Here are just a few spots in and around Phoenix for some great star-watching.

Stargazing Spots Around Phoenix, Arizona

Grand Canyon

The Phoenix Astronomical Society publishes a list of [Arizona Dark Sky Observing Sites](#) that have the least amount of ground-based light to obscure star (and meteor shower) viewing. Though true enthusiasts venture north the Grand Canyon to find the ultimate dark sky viewing spot, it pretty much goes without saying but we will anyway: It’s one of the most popular (cough, crowded) stargazing spots.

Distance: 145 miles, 2- to 3-hour drive

Apache Wash Trailhead

Just north of Phoenix, the Apache Wash Trailhead is a great jumping off point for star-watching. It branches to several different trails, some of which that lead uphill to some nice viewing vantage points. Others lead out into the open, dark desert.

Distance: 30 miles, 37-minute drive

Lake Pleasant

The Space Tourism Guide highlights 16 top stargazing locations around the Phoenix area like Lake Pleasant and Tempe Town Lake that provide good views within convenient commuting distance. There's also a campsite if you wanted to make a whole night or weekend of it.

Distance: 43 miles, 50-minute drive

Tempe Town Lake

Tempe Town Lake is another Space Tourism recommendation. It's popular for starry-eyed newbies who are just getting into the pastime.

Distance: 10 miles, 15-minute drive

Lowell Observatory

The dark skies around Flagstaff and Lowell Observatory offer many great viewing spots that are worth the trip. In the hills above Flagstaff, the venerable Lowell Observatory is the cornerstone of the city's celestial past, present, and future. Founded in 1894 by Percival Lowell, the observatory is the place from which Pluto was discovered in 1930, and where the first measures of the expanding universe occurred in the 1910s.

Arizona State Parks' Star Parties

If the meteor shower inspires you to do some continued stargazing, check out one of Arizona State Parks' Star Parties across the state this fall. Rangers and astronomers will provide telescopes and guiding viewing sessions for visitors on select nights. For further stargazing and education you can also visit Astronomy Nights at the planetarium at Mesa Community College, and regular astronomy shows at the Dorrance Planetarium at the Arizona Science Center in Phoenix.

So whether you're looking for inspiration to write your own hit song, interested in getting into stargazing, or just want a free show late this Saturday night, get out, lie down and look up to watch the wonders of the Perseid meteor shower.

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