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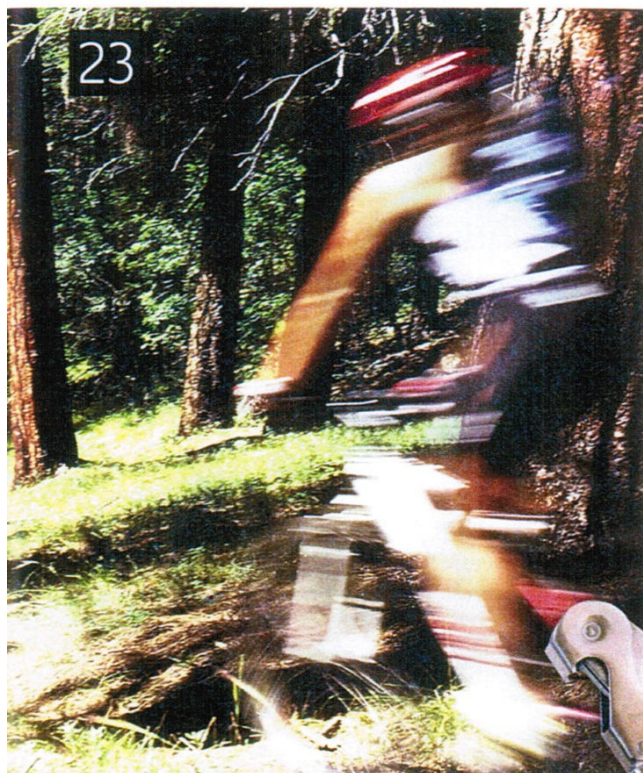
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# SANTA FEAN

SEPTEMBER 2005



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How avid environmentalist and former Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall has left a legacy of conservation not only to his politically active family, but also to the entire country.

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Cover *Apricot leaves*, photo by Jack Kotz.

Credits *Clockwise from top left*, North Borrego Trail, photo by Michael Darter; fashion accessory detail, photo by Mary Neiberg; waiter's corkscrew from Las Cosas, 181 Paseo de Peralta, 505-988-3394.

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WHEN IT COMES TO VIEWING  
THE COSMOS, NEW MEXICO  
MAY JUST BE THE FINEST FRONTIER

# Star Trek

BY JASON STEVENSON

It's after midnight and I'm walking along a potholed dirt road in darkness as total as a black hole. With the moon shrunk to a tiny sliver, the only illumination comes from the gauzy glow of hundreds of stars seeping between tall spires of trees. This road feels creepy, and I'm anxious for human company.

I'm searching for my fellow guests at the Star Hill Inn, a cluster of cabins perched on the eastern slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, just north of Las Vegas, New Mexico. Advertised as a "bed-and-telescope," this woodsy retreat serves up a dozen massive star finders instead of plates of huevos rancheros—and after a long night of gazing at galaxies, breakfast is more likely to be a lazy





Heavens-above: Millions of stars in the Milky Way shine above the Casitas de Gila bed-and-telescope.

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As the world turns: A long exposure of the night sky above Ghost Ranch.



DAVID MUEENCH





Beam me down: Far left, Astrophotographers Jim Janusz and Richard Payne with telescopes; left, a cozy casita at Star Hill Inn.

brunch anyway. The other guests are gathering at the inn's observation deck, and I'm eager to join them to see the night skies that make New Mexico famous.

Finally I reach the edge of the forest and catch the murmur of voices. Ahead in a clearing, I can make out the bulky shapes of giant telescopes perched on a wooden platform surrounded by a half dozen human figures. There are still no lights—a requirement for main-

taining optimal observing conditions—but at least I'm no longer alone. I clamber onto the deck and approach the inn's owner and resident guide, Phil Mahon, who is punching the coordinates for Jupiter into the tracking computer of a 12-inch Meade telescope. Motors and gears come to life as the barrel-shaped beast and its 300-pound mount rotate smoothly, seeking the correct location in the heavens. When it stops, Steve and Julia, engineering professors from Albuquerque, and their precocious sixth-grade son, Drew, step up to marvel at the giant planet and the bright specks of three of its moons. Drew, peering into the scope, immediately launches into a breathless description of spectacular lunar volcanoes and icefields.

The other guests around us, however, are too enthralled with chasing their own spiral galaxies to pay much attention. Some punch coordinates into computer-aimed telescopes. Others are visual astronomers—such as Angela, a friendly guest from Austin, Texas, who prefers a sheaf of star charts and a simple 17.5-inch Dobsonian to plot her course through the zodiac. “Manual telescopes are old-fashioned but fun,” she says, adjusting the towering device, which frames a faraway cluster of stars. She invites me to take a look. I peer through the eyepiece, and what my naked eye registers as a fuzzy gray ball is transformed into a hundred sharp pinpricks of white. “That cluster is about 40,000 light-years away,” Angela informs me. “Who knows what else is out there too?”

While our state may take a beating in national rankings for health care and education, when it comes to viewing the stars, the Land of Enchantment is at the top of the charts. Simply check out the DarkSky map of the United States ([www.darksky.org/darksky/index.html](http://www.darksky.org/darksky/index.html)). This online site plots light pollution to help astronomers find the darkest observing sites across the country. Not surprisingly, the population centers of the eastern seaboard glow like swarms of

## BED-AND-TELESCOPES

### Star Hill Inn

Located 10 miles north of Las Vegas, in the eastern foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Star Hill's eight guesthouses start at \$170 per night, with the Sunrise House renting for \$245; minimum stay is two nights. One telescope rental is included with stay. **OWNERS** Phil Mahon and Rae-Ann Kumelos-Mahon **CONTACT** 505-425-5605, [www.starhillinn.com](http://www.starhillinn.com)

### New Mexico Skies

Southern New Mexico's premier dark-sky spot, in the town of Cloudcroft, 30 miles east of Alamogordo. The property was originally designed for amateur astrophotographers and astronomers. Apartments and cabins rent for \$140 to \$210 per night, with telescope time extra. **OWNERS** Mike and Lynn Rice **CONTACT** 505-687-2429, [www.newmexicoskies.com](http://www.newmexicoskies.com)

### Casitas de Gila

This guesthouse and art gallery is located on 90 acres on the edge of the Gila Wilderness area, near Silver City. Guests can bring their own telescopes or use the facility's 10-inch Orion Dobsonian. Casitas range from \$140 to \$180 per night. **OWNERS** Michael and Becky O'Connor **CONTACT** 505-535-4455, [www.casitasdegila.com](http://www.casitasdegila.com)



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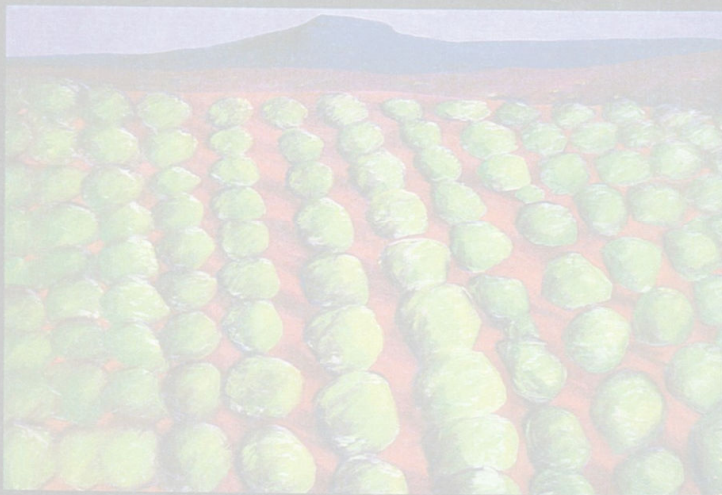
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## Star Trek

fireflies, rivaled only by the luminance of Chicago and Southern California. Finding New Mexico is tricky—it's just too dark. Besides a few bright patches for Albuquerque and Santa Fe, the rest of the state is an empty void, making this one of the few remaining spots in the country where it's dark enough to see the delicate wisps of the Milky Way.

Several factors converge to make New Mexico a stargazers' paradise. The dry climate is probably the most important, because water vapor in the air captures dust and scatters light. Weather and geography also play roles. Look closely at the stars overhead and you'll notice that they rarely twinkle here. Twinkling, or stellar scintillation, is caused by turbulent air in the atmosphere that distorts the light from space. The rounded tops of our mountains tend to smooth out turbulent air, leaving the skies over our state especially placid. High elevations help, too: telescopes placed on mountaintops have fewer miles of atmosphere to see through, and the state's few and scattered metropolitan areas generate less light pollution.

To protect their dark skies, the cities of Alamogordo, Cloudcroft, and Las Cruces have passed laws restricting outdoor lighting—Alamogordo's is one of the strongest light-pollution laws in the country. And in 1999 the New Mexico Night Sky Protection Act was passed to preserve the state's exceptional setting for astronomy. These measures, along with local governments' willingness to enforce them, have made New Mexico, especially the southern half of the state, a mecca for professional and amateur astronomers from all over the world.



A dazzling discovery: Comet Hale-Bopp streaks across the New Mexico sky.

COURTESY STAR HILL INN





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Let there be light: Our country's light pollution as captured by DarkSky.org.

Add to these factors our remarkably great weather: "The desert Southwest is one of the best places on Earth for astronomy, because over two-thirds of the nights here are usable for observing," says Bruce Gillespie, an astronomer and site manager for the Apache Point Observatory, whose telescopes crown the peaks of southern New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains. Gillespie says the mountains are the second-darkest spot in the country, trailing only an observatory in the Davis Mountains of west Texas. The downside to being dark: with so many visible stars, finding old standbys like the Big and Little Dipper takes slightly more skill. But once you do a little studying, what you can see is stunning. "Some of my students have never once looked up to the sky," says Tom Harrison, a professor who teaches introductory astronomy courses at New Mexico State University, in Las Cruces. "But once they start observing, they can't believe what's out there."

The state's superb conditions have led to some important discoveries. Dr. Alan Hale, a New Mexico native, returned to the Las Cruces area specifically because of his interest in astronomy. "I lived in Los Angeles for a while, and I know that I'm not a big-city person," he explains. "I wanted to be in a place where I could observe from the backyard." But it was Hale's front-yard observations that made him famous. Just before midnight on July 23, 1995, Hale, who had moved to Cloudcroft just four months before, was looking through his 16-inch Meade telescope when he noticed a fuzzy white patch near the constellation Sagittarius. "I immediately suspected that something was not quite right," he recalls. "I checked my charts, and nothing was supposed to be in that spot." Hale, who collects data on comets as a hobby, quickly realized that he'd found a new

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## Star Trek

one. "It's pretty ironic. I had spent 15 years searching for comets without success, and here I was tracking a known comet and I found something new."

After staying awake half the night making observations, Hale e-mailed his notes to the International Astronomical Union, the global clearinghouse for new discoveries, and by the next afternoon his find had been christened Comet Hale-Bopp, taking the other half of its name from Thomas Bopp, an amateur astronomer from Arizona who had found it at almost the same time. Their discovery achieved even more significance when astronomers realized that the comet, which measures 25 miles in diameter, would pass close enough to Earth to be visible with the unaided eye. Two years later, in 1997, millions of people watched Hale-Bopp streak by.

Amateur astronomers who can't move to New Mexico are content to visit as often as they can. "The observing conditions in southern New Mexico are so good," explains R.A. Greiner, a retired professor from Wisconsin, "that for the first time in my life I saw my shadow by the light of the Milky Way." When Greiner makes his annual pilgrimage, he stays at New Mexico Skies, a bed-and-telescope in the Sacramento Mountain town of Cloudcroft, run by Mike and Lynn Rice. The Rices, who moved here from Alaska, searched for five years to find the ideal location for their business, eventually buying property on a 7,300-foot ridge just east of the community. "We started looking in Arizona, but the spread of rural vacation homes has ruined that state for astronomy," Lynn says. New Mexico Skies opened for overnight guests in May 1999, and now it rents a half dozen apartments and cabins and eight large telescopes to visitors from across the U.S. and the globe. The Rices consider their ridge lucky—one local resident has discovered five comets from a spot nearby.

From my observation point just north of Las Vegas, the sights are equally stupendous. Refueling with hot cocoa throughout the night, I watch as the constellations circle like a giant clock face above Star Hill Inn. Galaxies, nebulae, and other objects of incomprehensible



## Star Trek

distance and magnitude appear in the viewfinders of telescopes and to my unaided eye. A tricky double star in the handle of the Big Dipper has my attention when I hear someone shout, "What's that?" Looking up, I follow the track of his finger to see a steady white light skipping rapidly across the sky. It's much too slow to be a meteorite, and it lacks the flashing-strobes of an airplane. "That's a satellite," calls out Joe, a postal worker from Staten Island and regular visitor to Star Hill. "Sunlight is reflecting off its solar panels. Watch—in a few seconds it will disappear." As predicted, the light slowly fades, leaving the sky to its more natural and permanent occupants.

Wow, I think. As evening turns into early morning, I see a dozen more objects for the first time, from the Andromeda galaxy to a cluster of a million stars in the Little Dipper. And the whole time, owner Phil Mahon keeps apologizing that this is an unusually cloudy evening. **SF**

*Writer Jason Stevenson moved to Santa Fe for the sun but is staying for the stars.*

## STELLAR RESOURCES

### El Valle Astronomers—Embudo

A nonprofit astronomy club for Northern New Mexico that holds monthly star parties in Taos and El Rito.

**NEXT DATES** September 2 (El Rito), September 30 (Taos)

**CONTACT** Lee Mesibov, 505-665-3120, [www.elvalleastronomers.com](http://www.elvalleastronomers.com)

### Pajarito Astronomers—Los Alamos

A club of 60 professional and amateur astronomers from throughout Northern New Mexico. Events include monthly public viewing nights at Overlook Park in White Rock, April–November.

**NEXT DATE** September 24, at 7 PM

**CONTACT** Dave Hollowell, 505-662-4272, [www.la.unm.edu/~beach/pajarito.html](http://www.la.unm.edu/~beach/pajarito.html)

### NM Museum of Space History

This museum complex in Alamogordo includes a planetarium, Imax theater, and the Hubbard Space Science Education Facility. Along with White Sands National Monument and the

Alamogordo Astronomy Club, the museum will host the Seventh Annual White Sands Star Party, which includes two nights of viewing, workshops, and tours.

**NEXT DATE** Star Party VII, September 30 and October 1

**CONTACT** museum, 877-333-6589, [www.spacefame.org](http://www.spacefame.org); star-party details, [www.zianet.com/wssp](http://www.zianet.com/wssp)

### Night Sky Adventures

Geoff Goins, an amateur astronomer, started this company in Red River to share his stargazing fascination. He gives lectures and tours around the state. His website offers reading recommendations for budding astronomers.

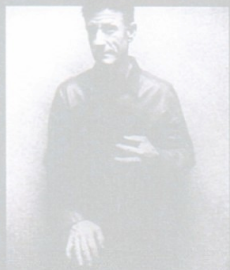
**CONTACT** 505-754-2941, [www.nightskyadventures.com](http://www.nightskyadventures.com)

### New Mexico Astronomical

New Mexico's largest telescope shop is located in Belen.

**CONTACT** 505-720-5666, [www.nmastronomical.com](http://www.nmastronomical.com)

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