Jamie Carter heads for some of the continent’s darkest corners and starriest skies – you can leave your light-pollution filters at home.

Where will you be when the lights go out? In Europe’s urban areas it simply never gets dark; light pollution renders cities less than perfect places to gaze at the heavens, but things are changing. Many of the world’s top telescopes may be in the darker southern hemisphere, but it’s perfectly possible to exercise your night vision much closer to home. Views of the southern Milky Way, nebulae and distant galaxies are on offer to anyone prepared to head to Europe’s darkest corners – and help is at hand. The US-based International Dark-Sky Association provides a proper certification scheme that monitors light pollution, the result of which are several Dark Sky Parks and Dark Sky Reserves across the continent. More will follow, but there are plenty of other places without ‘dark sky’ status where twilight and tourism make good bedfellows too.

Astronomy holiday destinations in this feature

About the Writer

Jamie Carter is a freelance travel writer with a passion for astronomy, observing and seeking out dark skies in unique holiday destinations around the world.
A ban on cars helps Sark to maintain its gloriously dark skies.

There are no cars or streetlights on this charming Channel Island

A one-hour ferry crossing from Guernsey, the island of Sark was named the world’s first Dark Sky Island in 2011. From 19-21 April 2013, it will host the second Sark Dark Sky Fest. Full details will be announced nearer the time, but Sark’s charms are obvious: without a single car, tarmacked road or streetlight, there are fewer more evocative – or darker – places from which to gaze upwards.

One of this rural island’s boutique properties, Stocks Hotel, offers a Dark Sky Sark short breaks package comprising two nights in a superior single, double or twin room, including breakfast and dinner. The deal includes a horse and carriage ride around Sark after dark, with Champagne and the use of a telescope.

You can fly to Guernsey from eight UK airports year round – Gatwick, Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Southampton, Exeter and East Midlands – with either Aurigny (www.aurigny.com), Flybe (www.flybe.com) or Blue Islands (www.blueislands.com) from around £79 each way. From Guernsey it’s a one-hour ferry crossing with Sark Shipping (www.sarkshippingcompany.com), though if you stay for four nights or more you can claim back the £27.80 cost of your return ferry ticket.

**DETAILS**

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Pic du Midi Observatory, France
Spend the night at southern France’s most famous observatory

This could be the perfect astro trip if you have children. Located on a Pyrenean peak just two hours (and a short cable car ride) from Toulouse, Pic du Midi Observatory is the most famous in France – and it’s open all night.

The special Les Nuits au Sommet (Nights at the Summit) package includes a visit to the facilities and museum, observing the sunset from the terrace, astronomical activities with four astronomers (you’ll get to use some of the equipment) and dinner. You then spend a night in the ‘high up’ hotel, watch sunrise from the terrace, have breakfast and visit scientists at the Pic du Midi.

Nearby are three child-friendly variations on an astronomical theme. Toulouse’s Cité de l’Espace (Space Town) theme park includes a 360° planetarium and a full-scale Ariane 5 rocket – adults €19, children €13. France’s tallest telescope lies in wait at Parc aux Étoiles (Star Park) at nearby Triel-sur-Seine, adults €6, children €4.50, while Parc du Cosmos (Cosmos Park), 15 minutes from Avignon, hosts a guided 90-minute star walk to explain astronomy’s key concepts, with a planetarium on hand in a traditional local hut – adults €13, children €10.

DETAILS
Holiday Les Nuits au Sommet
Cost €249 for one person, €379 for two
Duration one night (most weekdays throughout February and March)
Company Independently arranged
Website www.picdumidi.com
Phone number +33 825 00 2877

Zselic Starry Sky Park, Hungary
Night hikes in Hungary’s dark heart

Zselic Landscape Protection Area, about 70km south of Lake Balaton in southwest Hungary, is the darkest spot in Eastern Europe. It is an International Dark Sky Park, similar to Galloway Forest Park in Scotland.

The area has been long loved by astronomers, though Zselic’s night-time walks are open to all. Around 5-9km in length and organised in cooperation with the Hungarian Astronomical Association, the March–October treks start at dusk and attract around 100 people – and they don’t take any torches with them.

“Even in the forest it is possible to hike only by the light of the starry sky,” says guide Zoltán Kolláth. “We stop at forest openings and show the stars and constellations using a green laser pointer. Usually at one location it is possible to use a mobile telescope to see some planets and clusters.”

There are plans for a starry sky park visitor centre at Zselic, which would contain a public observatory, a digital planetarium and auditorium. Hotel Kardosfa (www.kardosfa.hu) is within the Zselic’s boundaries.

DETAILS
Holiday Zselic Starry Sky Park
Cost Rooms for two staying half board at the Hotel Kardosfa start from £70 per person per night
Duration Various
Company Independently arranged
Website http://zselic.csillagpark.hu/en.html
Phone number None
Isle of Wight Star Party
Cliff-edge views of a dark southern horizon

With southerly views and minimal light pollution, there are few better stargazing spots in the UK than the Isle of Wight. Astronomers watching the skies from the west of the island in particular can see some of the low-altitude objects that are tricky to spot from the rest of the UK.

Dark skies abound, but if you need an excuse the annual Isle of Wight Star Party (www.iowstarparty.org) will be held on 7-11 March 2013 at Brighstone Holiday Centre. A three-night break at Brighstone costs from £240, based on two people sharing a room on a bed and breakfast basis, and includes return vehicle ferry crossings from Portsmouth with Red Funnel. If you’re thinking of taking a tent or camper van (some are available on site) you might want to get in early to bag one of the prime spots; set up your scope near the edge of the cliff to take advantage of the low horizon far out at sea.

DETAILS
Holiday: Isle of Wight Star Party
Cost: £240 for two people
Duration: Three nights
Company: Brighstone Holidays
Website: www.brighstone-holidays.co.uk
Phone number: 01983 740244

Les Granges, France
The ultimate place to practice astrophotography

If astrophotography is on your horizon, there are few better places to learn or improve than Les Granges in southern France. This Provençal farmhouse is the result of owner Olly Penrice’s search for the best possible site in mainland Europe for an astronomy centre. Situated a little north of the Observatoire de Haute-Provence – where exoplanet 51 Pegasi was discovered – Les Granges is inland, farther away from coastal light pollution. Free imaging and image-processing tuition is on offer to beginners and advanced imagers alike, using the six telescopes (including a 20-inch Dobsonian, apochromats and astrographs) from a site where stars down to mag. +7.0 are visible. Penrice also offers tours of the Universe in full astronomical darkness – even in June – and taught courses in astronomy over five two-hour classroom sessions. Spend a week in this countryside retreat and you’re likely to achieve something very special.

DETAILS
Holiday: Les Granges B&B
Cost: €42 per person per night, €850 per week for whole house (max. six people)
Duration: Various
Company: Sun Star France
Website: www.sunstarfrance.com
Phone number: +33 492 66 2257

Pic du Midi offers a rare combination – a hotel and a working observatory

The Rosette Nebula, imaged during the Isle of Wight star party

The Pleiades is stunning from light-pollution-free Les Granges

Star trails above Zsélc International
Dark Sky Park

You’ll need to get to the event early if you want the best observing spots
Alqueva Dark Sky Route, Portugal
Mainland Europe’s darkest corner is Starlight Tourism Destination-certified

The first area of Europe to be deemed a Starlight Tourism Destination by UNESCO, the World Tourism Organization and the Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias because of its intensely dark, clear skies, the area surrounding the man-made Alqueva Lake in Portugal’s Alentejo region (www.darkskyalqueva.com) is a first-class stargazing spot. The area boasts an average of 286 clear nights a year, with the lake a prime spot for total darkness; this trip consists of seven nights self-catering on a slow-moving houseboat, complete with freedom to moor-up anywhere to set up your own equipment.

For a night or two using telescopes set up in advance, complete with local food and red wine, consider hopping on the Dark Sky Route, which passes through villages and takes in myriad activities from stargazing (even on horseback or from canoes on the lake) to bird watching, hiking and wine tasting. Two good bases are either Monte Alterta (www.montealterta.pt) or Monte Santa Catarina (www.montesantacatarina.com). The former has a Meade ETX-125 that’s ideal for studying planets and their moons, while the latter has a 12-inch Dobsonian telescope perfect for exploring faint deep-sky objects. The best time to see the Milky Way is in July and August.

**DETAILS**
**Holiday** Sunvil Discovery: Alentejo
**Cost** £942 per person
**Duration** Seven nights
**Company** Sunvil Discovery
**Website** www.sunvil.co.uk
**Phone number** 0208 758 4722

**Low Gillerthwaite, Ennerdale, Cumbria**
The only Dark Sky Discovery Site in the northwest of England

Now an accredited Dark Sky Discovery Site and part of the UK Dark Sky Discovery Partnership, Low Gillerthwaite Field Centre is right in the middle of what’s been described as England’s last true wilderness, where municipal lighting is non-existent.

Surrounded by mountains and one of the remotest places in the UK – it is more than 3km to the nearest public road – Gillerthwaite is following up on last year’s successful programme of Dark Sky events with more winter-based activities. Held on the weekend of 9-10 February 2013 (which coincides with a new Moon), the events will feature the Science and Technology Facilities Council’s Star Lab, an inflatable planetarium that can hold over 40 people. Visitors will be treated to a rotating, digital illustration of the Universe on the domed walls of Gillerthwaite’s 18th century barn, with local expert astronomers on hand to answer questions over hot soup.

Self-catering, hostel accommodation is available, but book ahead and bring a sleeping bag, provisions, stout footwear and warm clothes.

**DETAILS**
**Holiday** Low Gillerthwaite Field Centre, Ennerdale
**Cost** £14 per night
**Duration** Two nights (9-10 February)
**Company** Independently arranged
**Website** www.lgfc.org.uk/bookings-book.htm
**Phone number** 01946 861229
**QUICK GETAWAYS…**

**Exmoor**

Exmoor National Park was the first place in Europe to get the title of International Dark Sky Reserve – Silver status. Yarn Market Hotel (www.yarnmarkethotel.co.uk) in the beautiful medieval village of Dunster has a Stargazing Break from 1-3 February 2013, which includes two nights’ dinner, bed and breakfast. Steve Owens, a freelance science communicator, writer and astronomer, acts as the guide for the weekend.

**Eastbourne**

Re-enact the pre-colonial dark skies of North America at Big Sky Tipis (www.bigskytipiholidays.co.uk) near Eastbourne, a campsite of authentic hand-painted Indian Sioux tipis at a site with excellent stargazing, chosen specifically for the clear skies and lack of light pollution. It’s just five minutes walk to The Observatory Science Centre (www.the-observatory.org), which also offers regular stargazing events through its historic telescopes. A free monthly star party is held in Eastbourne at the historic Redoubt Fortress and Military Museum, with Eastbourne Astronomical Society supplying the telescopes and often a talk.

**Normandy**

Luxury stargazing from an eco tree house is on offer at Perché dans le Perche (www.perchedansleperche.com) in the Orne area of southern Normandy. A representative of the local astronomical association, Perche Astronomie, joins guests at the tree house and leads a stargazing session, with powerful telescopes on hand in the neighbouring village of Bellou-le-Trichard. English is spoken and viewing sessions can be arranged in advance. One night’s bed and breakfast costs £57 per person based on four sharing, which includes the guided stargazing session as well as lunch or dinner.