

Death Valley skies come to life at night



NEEL ROBERTS
Sky's the Limit

Do you think the Sahara Desert is the hottest place on Earth?

Nope, it's Death Valley, located in the interior of California with a recorded temperature of 56.7 C (134 F) measured on July 10, 1913 at Greenland Ranch, according to Guinness World Records.

Located on the same latitude as the Island of Cyprus, Death Valley is 190 feet below sea level and

has an arid landscape, making it the best candidate for the fieriest place in the world.

Having recently returned from there, it is one of the greatest astronomical journeys I've been on as they have some of the darkest skies near civilization on main highways in North America.

While the temperatures are unforgiving in the summer, winter is a modest 15 Celsius during the day, so perfect for Canadians. Also, off-season prices apply with few people.

The night skies near the two main resorts of Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells are impressive, but there's still a bit of light. I travelled further west to the one-horse town of Grant, California, which is hours from any city lights, and that was the showcase of night viewing. There, with 12 hours of dark skies at moderate temperatures, you can stay out a long time. The Milky Way is so bright it literally casts a shadow on a moonless night while its stars reflect in the water.

Death Valley is designated as the largest Dark Sky National Park in the country by the International Dark Sky Association. You might be tired at night, but as the old Mamas and the Papas psychedelic '60s song says, this is "California Dreamin'!"

Sky watch

The Zodiacal Light is a faint, roughly triangular, whitish glow seen in the night sky extended up from the vicinity of the sun along the ecliptic, or zodiac. The best time to view it is from Tuesday, Feb. 11 for two weeks after the evening, in the west.

The Valentine's star is visible Valentine's Day, this Friday, starting in the southeast-east from dusk and setting in the west after 3:30 a.m.

Look southeast on Thursday, Feb. 20 at 6:15 a.m. to see Saturn and the moon come up together before they fade into daylight. *Neel Roberts, a member of the Calgary chapter of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, welcomes your questions and comments at 403-560-6374 and Neel.Roberts@ptecanada.com.*