

Arctic atmosphere trumps city and rural skies any day

The farmer's Almanac prediction of a wet and nasty winter for the west is not only coming true but also keeps us indoors while we might miss some of the longest night skies this season.

Globe and Mail science reporter Ivan Semenuik (www.theglobeandmail.com/authors/ivan-semeniuk) is an amateur astronomer, astronomy TV producer and recent visitor to Eureka, Nunavut, to the Polar Environment Atmospheric Research Laboratory (PEARL).

PEARL is located about 80 latitude degrees north with wind-chills down to -70 C in the dead of winter, and astronomers have been capitalizing on the infrastructure for decades.

Unlike its frosty counterparts Greenland and Antarctica, this observatory is bolted to solid rock compared to ice.



Neel Roberts
The Sky's the Limit

Also, the median seeing of 0.76 arc seconds is well compatible with world class sites such as Hawaii's Mauna Kea and Chile's Cerro Tololo.

As extraordinary as these are, the cold is undoubtedly a stumbling block, so I had to get a reliable eye witness.

Chuck Slade of Calgary, a pilot with Air Canada who now flies the jumbos and personal friend of mine for about 20 years, recalls his earlier days in Eureka as a bush pilot for Ken Borek Air.

"The skies are spectacular at night with the

crystal-clear atmosphere — you could clearly see the gas clouds of the Milky Way bands with unsurpassed darkness in the background."

Though he lives in the city, his family getaway is his trailer in scenic Burnt Stick Lake between Caroline and Sundre.

While the great outdoors are a welcomed break, there's just "no comparison" to the North Pole skies, which leave a lifetime impression for all visitors!

Sky watch for the next month

The half moon rises with Saturn before dawn on Friday, Jan. 16. Look in the southeast-east horizon at about 4:30 a.m. and the ringed planet will be rising with the moon.

With good binoculars, you can actually see the rings!

Four planets will be visible at dusk just after sunset on Monday, Jan. 19 in the southwest-west sky.

You'll see Venus and Mercury on the horizon setting, and look higher up to the southwest and you'll see the red planet Mars.

With a good telescope you can spot Neptune to the upper right of Mars.

Venus will set with the moon at dusk on Wednesday, Jan. 21.

Look to the southwest before sunset as the bright star is actually Venus setting with Mercury ahead of it with Mars behind.

Neel Roberts is a member of the Calgary chapter of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada.

He welcomes your questions and comments at 403-560-6574 and at Neel_Roberts@ptccanada.com.