



Look up! Right now, astro tourism is suddenly the hottest thing in travel, with hotels offering up everything from midnight boat rides to roofless rooms in some of the most exotic locations. It's time to worship the heavens...

# STARS IN OUR EYES

WORDS AMY MOLLOY

**BLAME BRIAN COX** for making stargazing sexy. There's nothing like swinging in a hammock with a big gin and tonic, spending hours looking up and ooh-ing and ah-h-ing at the constellations. And it's a trend that's catching on – in the hospitality industry 'astro tourism' has become one of the latest buzz phrases, with luxury destinations offering accommodation options and specialist tours geared towards night owls who would rather stay up late than wake up early. Some of the best places to watch the night sky also happen to be the most stunning places on Earth. And according to the experts, taking time to watch the night sky could be good for your health, as some holistic practitioners believe observing the moon's cycle can regulate your menstrual cycle, reducing PMS. Who knew? Here are our top places to spend the night...



PERFECT FOR  
Desert  
explorers

## Moongazing in CHILE

Alto Atacama is one hotel where you'll never have to worry about rain stopping play. Located in the driest non-polar desert in the world, the desert lodge and spa is cut into a rocky canyon so similar to Mars that NASA has used it to test equipment. With six outside pools and an observation deck to gaze at the solar system, you'll feel like a desert explorer – except you'll have a luxury suite to retreat to. In the day, guests can enjoy a range of activities, depending on how energetic you're feeling, from a gentle hike through 'moon valley' to a trek up one of the nearby volcanoes. Be warned – 'alto' translates as 'high' and the altitude may take it out of you. But the good news is working out at high altitude can burn more calories.

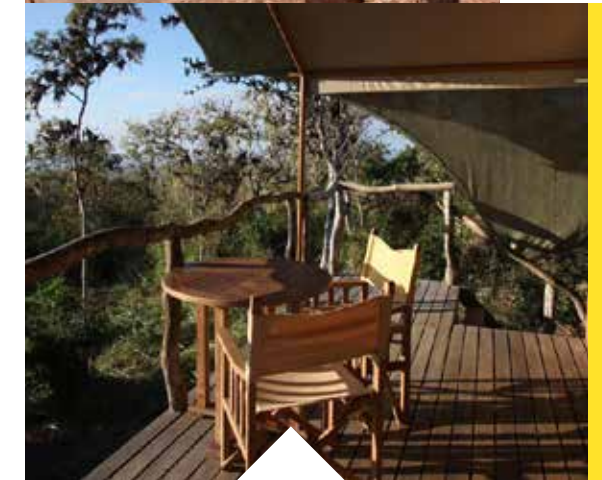
**THE LOWDOWN** From £2,808pp for six nights full-board. [altoatacama.com](http://altoatacama.com)



## An upside-down sky in TASMANIA

OK you've seen stars, but have you ever seen the Southern Cross? Possibly not, as this Aussie icon can't be seen in the northern hemisphere. And boy, are they proud of it! At Saffire Freycinet – named the top luxury hotel in Australia – every suite looks out over Great Oyster Bay, which means amazing views – and amazing seafood on the menu. Complimentary experiences include kayaking through pelican-filled wetlands, hiking to the nearby Wineglass Bay lookout – and tasting Tasmania's famous vino. As for the stargazing, there's a reason the Australian Astrologers International Conference was held in Tasmania last year. Just look up!

**THE LOWDOWN** From A\$2,250 pp per night. Get fourth night free. [saffire-freycinet.com.au](http://saffire-freycinet.com.au)



## Camp under the stars in ECUADOR

For authentic stargazing you've got to sleep under a canopy – but that doesn't mean you have to rough it. At the Galapagos Safari Camp in Ecuador, husband and wife Michael Mesdag and Stephanie Bonham-Carter decided to set up a luxury tented community on the island of Santa Cruz, after visitors to the Islands kept asking to pitch tents on their 55-hectare property. And we can see why. With views overlooking the 'enchanted island', you can spend your day snorkelling with giant tortoises and sea lions, and your nights sitting on the observation desk after a three-course dinner cooked by their prized chef. Combine your stay with a boat trip to the neighbouring Isabella Island where you can camp for \$5 a night at Campo Duro, an eco lodge that's also home to giant turtles. You can even get a free breakfast, by strolling through the fruit orchard. Bargain!

**THE LOWDOWN** From \$535 per person (£343) per night half-board. [galapagos-safaricamp.com](http://galapagos-safaricamp.com). To enter the Galapagos Islands you pay \$100 taxes towards the preservation of the national park. ▶





*Astronomy lessons in the*  
**MALDIVES**

You know you're in the right spot for astro tourism when you find yourself sharing a pool with the second man to walk on the moon. Yep, Buzz Aldrin is a regular guest at the Soneva Fushi resort, which has its own observatory tower on the premises and offers night-time astronomy classes where beginners can learn how to point out the constellations and count the moons around Jupiter. But it's not just about getting your geek on. The resort also offers snorkelling, scuba-diving and spa treatments based on principles of the Slow Movement. You can also book a 'Robinson Crusoe castaway picnic' where you're whisked away to a private sand dune for breakfast as the sun rises. At night, if the stars don't hold your attention, it also has an outdoor cinema.

**THE LOWDOWN** From \$1,083 (£695) per night based on two sharing a Crusoe Villa. [soneva.com](http://soneva.com)



*Midnight boat rides in*  
**PERU**

Imagine floating down the Amazon river in a rubber dingy while the sun sets. Or taking a boat ride in the dark with only the stars and the bright lights of baby alligators breaking up the darkness. This is how they do stargazing at Amazon Planet Lodge, where you can feel like a hard-core explorer – without giving up all comforts (hot water in the bungalows – yes! WiFi – no way!). Want to escape civilisation? The only distractions are the howler monkeys. Owner James Sutton set up the lodge with a compensation cheque he received after being nearly killed by a drunk driver. Ask him to take you on a night-hike to the top of the 55-foot canopy walk and you'll feel like you're at one with the Milky Way. On the opposite side of the river is the eco-resort Inkaterra, a favourite hangout for Bono and Mick Jagger. Amazon Planet, however, is a fraction of the price.

**THE LOWDOWN** Three nights full-board from AU\$934pp (£442). [amazonplanetperu.com](http://amazonplanetperu.com)

*Ski and sky watch in*  
**SWITZERLAND**

Sitting 3,100 meters above sea level, Kulmhotel Gornergrat, the highest altitude hotel in Europe, isn't just popular with skiers, but also amateur astronomers – and ordinary people who just like to ooh and ahh at stars. Every room is named after one of the 29 mountain peaks that surround it, and is your own personal observation station with views of the surrounding glaciers, and the (usually) cloudless skies. Due to the dry air and seclusion, even the Milky Way and planets are visible to the naked eye, although the hotel also recommends using the SkySafari app so you know what you're looking at. Time your booking with a full moon when the glaciers turn iridescent and the hotel offers a 'moonlight fascination package' combining stargazing with cheese fondue and live music. Take a peak!

**THE LOWDOWN** Summer season rates start at CHF295 (£196) for a double room with views of Monte Rosa. [gornergrat-kulm.ch](http://gornergrat-kulm.ch)

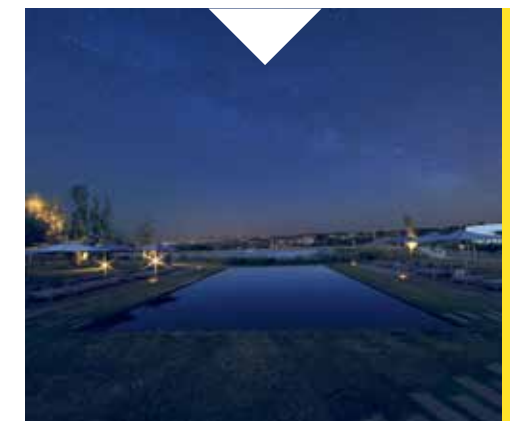


**PERFECT FOR**  
*Amazon adventures*

*Roofless hotel rooms in*  
**PORTUGAL**

Ten of the 22 rooms at Portugal's L'And Vineyards resort are Sky Suites, with fully retractable ceilings above the beds that allow you to sleep under the stars – literally. Situated in the Portuguese region of Alentejo – an area famous for its lack of air pollution – this is not only a prime location to stargaze but wine-taste, too. At the spa, ingredients are naturally sourced from the hotel's vineyard, such as spring water and grape extract. Want to feel even closer to the solar system? The hotel offers hot air balloon experiences and daring guests can book a parachute jump at the local airfield. Or just sit in the plunge pool in your room's private garden. We know which we'd rather!

**THE LOWDOWN** Sky View suites from €235pp per night (£163). [l-andvineyards.com](http://l-andvineyards.com)



**PERFECT FOR**  
*Learning and chilling*

See the stars and the world's most amazing places at the same time: the Maldives (above); Europe's highest hotel (right); Amazon Planet Lodge in Peru (top centre and top right), and unpolluted Alentejo in Portugal (far right)