

Astronomers reach for the stars at Arizona village

REUTERS 

Reuters Photo: Retired lab technician and amateur astronomer Jim Algots stands on the steps to his observatory...

By Tim Gaynor

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ARIZONA SKY VILLAGE, Arizona (Reuters) - When night falls over the empty desert, retiree Jim Algots climbs the wooden steps to his observatory, dims the lights and rolls back the roof to reveal an ink-black sky.

Until dawn he can train his telescope on a rich field of stars, knowing that despite living in one of the most remote spots in the United States he is very far from being alone.

The former laboratory technician is among scores of passionate astronomers who have beaten a path to Arizona [Sky Village](#), a purpose-built community for star-gazers in southern Arizona more than two hours drive southeast of [Tucson](#).

Laid out on 450 acres beside the Chiricahua Mountains, the community has attracted residents from Britain, [South Korea](#) and [Russia](#) as well as the farthest corners of the United States in the past five years.

The graded access roads -- with names like Skyview Drive, South Milky Way and Starlight Trail -- link a low-density community of astronomy enthusiasts, each with their own four-acre (1.6-hectare) plot.

A number of houses have sprung up among the mesquite brush, most with one or two observatories equipped with powerful reflector telescopes, while some other newcomers to the project are still marking out land and building.

"When I retired, I thought I was looking for an isolated place for myself to view the stars," said Algots, 68, who is just finishing work fitting out a ready-built home and the observatory that he built for himself.

"Then I realized that wasn't what I wanted. Here I am surrounded by like-minded people."

INK-BLACK SKIES

The United States has more than 1 million amateur star-gazer and there are several dedicated villages catering to them, including Deerlick Astronomy Village in Georgia and Chiefland Astronomy Village in neighboring [Florida](#).

The communities are all located in remote areas far from flaring city lights that spoil views of the night sky. Residents abide by rules forbidding bright lights anywhere from dusk till dawn to preserve optimum viewing.

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With its stable weather conditions, bone-dry air and isolated location, the Arizona [Sky Village](#) offers a near-perfect setting for astronomers, allowing them to see even faint objects like the swirling clouds of gas that make up nebulae and the spiral arms of far-off galaxies in transparent detail.

"It's ink-black, dead-dark, one of the darkest places in the country," says Gene Turner, an amateur astronomer and one of the project's developers.

"The Milky Way is so bright here, it's three-dimensional. In 1500 you could see it everywhere like this but now that's very rare," he said.

Turner acquired the spot after roaming the desert state at night searching for the darkest skies. He and business partner Jack Newton then put in roads, power lines and a fast Internet connection.

The buyers include some astronomers around the country and world who operate sophisticated telescopes robotically, gazing into the dense star field from different time zones.

"Last week I was sitting in a hotel room in [Australia](#), looking at the night sky over [Arizona](#)," said [California](#)-based software engineer [David Churchill](#), whose computerized observatory at Arizona Sky Village is equipped with Web cams and cloud sensors to aid remote viewing. "I can play with it from anywhere in the world."

KEEPING IT PRISTINE

Some villagers are passionate amateur astronomers who tirelessly search for objects such as asteroids and supernovae

-- exploding stars visible in galaxies millions of light years away -- that are sometimes missed by professionals.

Most, however, are devoted hobbyists who spend their nights viewing for pleasure from their own well-equipped observatories under dimmed red lights, some getting into the mood with a Beethoven symphony or ambient guitar music.

Retired engineer Rick Beno originally is from California. He used to trek out to remote areas with a portable telescope for the occasional evening taking pictures of the stars, although having his own two-story observatory now allows him to take photographs year round.

"The sky always comes back. This way I don't need to get it in one night, I can just wait until next year," he says of the constellations and planets he snaps as they wheel over the desert horizon with the progression of the seasons.

The development has proved very popular and Turner says that all 85 lots sold out fast. All that now remain are fractional shares in homes in the subdivision in the remote corner of Arizona, which last year overtook [Nevada](#) to become the fastest growing state in the country.

But despite strong demand, he is cautious about further development in the remote area, which is also very popular with hikers and bird watchers.

"We are considering it but we are very sensitive to over-population," Turner said. "It doesn't take too long to get to the other world but we want to keep this pristine."

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