



Across the universe

It has been 400 years since Galileo first looked through a telescope — and that's cause for a celebration, writes **Rob Dunlop**

QUEENSLAND is blessed with some of the clearest skies in the world. And with powerful telescopes available to the public, this year — the International Year of Astronomy — is set to be astronomical.

Astro-tourism is the new buzz word. And star gazers around the world are excited about the special events and celebrations that will take place throughout the year to help mark the 400th anniversary of when Galileo, father of modern astronomy, looked through a telescope for the first time.

In Queensland, the event takes on even more significance because Brisbane is named after one of Australia's astronomy forefathers, Sir Thomas Brisbane (just block your ears when anyone tells you he hailed from New South Wales).

Here is a selection of Queensland's best astro-tourism.

Sir Thomas Brisbane Planetarium

The state's premier astro complex is in the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, Mt Coot-tha. The Planetarium boasts an observatory with telescopes available for public use, a theatre showing several fascinating films about our

universe, and the Cosmic Skydome with a giant screen that depicts Brisbane's night sky.

To celebrate the International Year of Astronomy, a free field night will be held in September or October (the exact date has yet to be announced). Astronomers will be on hand with telescopes spread across the lawns for everyone to use. And the big domed telescope will also be in action, for a small fee.

Each Saturday night, the Planetarium hosts viewing sessions. The sessions cost \$13.60 for adults and \$8.35 for children (height restrictions apply — children must be more than 1.5m tall to view from the eyepiece). Bookings essential and are dependent on weather conditions.

The Planetarium is open Tuesday to Friday 10am to 4pm, Saturday 11am to 8.15pm and Sunday 11am to 4pm. Entry is free, but films cost \$12.70 for adults and \$7.40 for children. Call 3403 2578 or visit www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/planetarium.

Queensland Astrofest

If camping or dorm-style accommodation with large groups of astronomers (and with a great chance of tripping over their telescopes) sounds like your thing, then head to Camp Duckadang in Linville, about two hours' drive northwest of Brisbane.

An annual event since 1993, the Queensland Astrofest will celebrate even more this year. There will be feasts, workshops, stalls, trivia nights, games and plenty of star parties.

The event takes place from August 14 to 23. A day pass costs \$5.50. Overnight stays cost \$20 for adults and \$10.50 for children. Discounts apply for longer stays. Phone 3274 5073 or visit www.qldastrofest.org.au.

Mt Kent Observatory

Mt Kent Observatory, 20km southwest of Toowoomba, is the astronomy teaching and research laboratory of the University of Southern Queensland. The facility is not normally open to the public, except for

monthly field nights.

National Science Week (August 17-25) takes on new meaning this year, so USQ will hold "An Evening with the Stars" event during which the public can view stars, planets, galaxies, constellations and the moon using a computer-controlled telescope. Entry is free, but bookings are essential. Call 4635 1398.

For information about the monthly field nights, call 4632 2651 or visit www.ournightsky.com. For more information about the observatory, visit www.usq.edu.au/sciences/biophysci/facilities/mtkent.htm.

Twinstar Guesthouse and Observatory

This unique B&B in Ballandean, about three hours' drive southwest of

Brisbane, boasts not only unspoilt national park surrounds but also its own observatory.

A night-time guided tour of the heavens, using a 46cm telescope in a 4.5m white dome, is part of the stay. And to help celebrate the International Year of Astronomy, the owners will open their observatory to the public for free viewing nights once a month throughout the year.

Twinstar Guesthouse has three guest rooms with ensuite and separate entrance off the veranda.

Located at 28146 New England Highway, Ballandean, near Stanthorpe. Overnight rates are \$110 for couples and \$90 for singles, and include breakfast and night sky tour. Call 4684 1135 or visit www.twinstar.com.au.

Continued Page 22



Astronomically starstruck

From Page 21

Maidenwell Astronomical Observatory

Queensland's biggest self-funded observatory is on a 4ha property in Maidenwell, about two hours' drive north of Brisbane.

Owner James Barclay sold his home to follow a dream to set up his own astronomical facility.

Although James's passion is astronomy, he is not planning anything special for the big year. His ongoing mission is to "show off the stars, moon and planets with big telescopes".

His 60-90 minute green-laser guided night sky tours run daily from 7pm during autumn and winter; they cost \$25 for adults and \$12.50 for children. The daytime show is a one-hour audio visual presentation of the Solar System and the Universe that costs \$20 for adults and \$11 for children. Combined day and night sessions, and family discounts are also available.

The observatory entrance is off Kingaroy-Cooyar Rd, Maidenwell. Call 4164 6194 or visit

www.starsabove.com.au.

Charleville Cosmos Centre and Observatory

In Charleville, 750km from Brisbane, you can discover the untainted skies of Outback Queensland.

The Charleville Cosmos Centre and Observatory houses interactive displays that explore the history of astronomy, and the theatre provides films and talks for daytime visitors.

At night, the powerful telescopes are used to view stars, planets and star

clusters, including the Sagittarius arm of the Milky Way. Sun filters also allow for daytime use of the telescopes.

Qantas Drive, Charleville.

Open daily (\$5 a head) from April to October, 10am-5pm. Night sessions at 7.30pm. From November to March, open Monday to Saturday, 10am-5pm. Night sessions Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at 8pm. Night session cost \$22 for adults and \$15 for children 4-14. Family rate \$48. Bookings essential for night sky tour. Call 4654 7771 or visit www.cosmoscentre.com.

Free year-round public viewings

Some Queensland astronomy societies provide free year-round field nights for the public, where telescopes and education session are provided. Here are some of them.

Urban Observers: The southeast Queensland society holds "Urban Observers" nights at Indooroopilly High School on the first Sunday of each month (except January) and at Mt Coot-tha Lookout on the third Sunday of each month. Call 3325 2479 or visit www.seqas.org.

Brisbane Field Nights: The Astronomical Association of Queensland holds regular "Brisbane Field Nights" in parks and suburban backyard observatories of members.

The "Deep Sky Observing Nights" are held near Harrisville, 45 minutes' drive southwest of Brisbane, and Mt Kent Observatory. Star parties are also planned for the big year. Visit www.aaq.org.au.

MORE: New events celebrating the International Year of Astronomy are still being announced. For more information or to keep up to date, visit www.astronomy.org.au and www.iya2009.org.



Great unknown: The Sir Thomas Brisbane Planetarium; inside the Mt Coot-tha planetarium; the Twinstar Guesthouse and Observatory in Ballandean, southwest of Brisbane; and (top) a couple of star-gazers

