

## City enthusiasts get ready to go stargazing

November to March is the best time to engage in star-gazing, say experts. Numerous astronomical clubs have come up in the city to help amateur astronomers watch the skies at night and spot, explore and celebrate important celestial events.



A couple stargaze at a camp by the sea on the East Coast Road near Kovalam Chennai:

With a change in season, nights are setting in much earlier over the last one month — the perfect setup to go for star-gazing. So, if you own a pair of binoculars, then make good use of it or even better, you can join one of the many astronomy clubs in town and go out with a group of like-minded people to the outskirts of the city to spot stars or for important celestial events. This is the best time to do this, for November end and December are when the skies are the clearest.

“We launched our operations in Chennai about one-and-a-half years ago and there has been so much enthusiasm among people. Right now we are working towards creating astronomy clubs in schools across the city. Towards the year-end we are planning to take a bunch of kids to Nagalapuram for a star-gazing weekend. They are all hyper-excited already. There are lots of schools who are ready to engage with us for taking kids abroad as well for astro-tourism,” said S Venkata Narayanan, zonal business manager (south) of Space Popularisation Association of Communicators and Educators (SPACE), a leading astronomy education and astronomy travel provider that also offers exciting package tours, especially for students, covering all important international space observatories, camps and space treks in USA, Europe and Asia & South Pacific.

There are a number of clubs, such as Horizon: The Astronomy Club of IIT Madras, Chennai Astronomy Club, and Indian Amateur Astrophotographer, that provide platforms for constant engagement on the topic. While the events held by Chennai Astronomy Club are open to the general public, the club at IIT focusses more on engaging students at an academic level.

Vinod K, one of the founders of Exoticamp, an organisation that holds star-gazing camps, says, “We have seen an increase in terms of participation and interest shown by the public, particularly those in the 20-40 years demographic. To cater to this growing interest, this year, we are having a number of camps lined up in Kovalam, Marakanam and near Tada falls. These locations are largely devoid of light pollution that make for the perfect environment for star-gazing. Our camps are priced at 2,000 per individual and are inclusive of necessary gear, tents to sleep in and food.”

Nirubha Malarkodi, a city based beauty consultant and amateur stargazer, says she watches the sky from the comfort of a rooftop hammock at her home in Kotturpuram. “The best thing about becoming a stargazer is that you make a lifelong friend — the sky. It’s very relaxing and puts things into perspective for me. Also, you don’t need to confine yourself to a fixed set of rules in interpreting constellations. Start by finding a noticeable pattern and then another pattern nearby. Notice triangles, curves and straight lines of star and make up your own stories. Also, if you don’t have necessary equipment, there are apps like Stellarium and Sky View Free to help you spot them. All you have to do is hold your smartphone towards the sky, and the screen spots and names breath-taking constellations.”