

Stargazing

Digging deeper...

Aurora australis can sometimes be seen throughout New Zealand but more commonly in the Southern skies. An Aurora is caused by fast moving solar particles colliding with particles in the Earth's atmosphere, releasing energy in the form of light. These particles are funnelled towards the North and South poles by the Earth's magnetic field, which is why Aurora australis is more commonly seen down south.

Digging deeper...

Every culture has its own stories about the stars. What was Orion to the Greeks formed part of the great Waka to the Tainui Māori. The Matariki (Pleiades) star cluster, which appears in early June marks the start of the Māori new year.

Local nuggets

How to spot the Southern Cross

An easy way to find the Southern Cross in our night sky is to find the two pointer stars. These bright stars form part of the constellation Centaurus and 'point' to the Southern Cross.

Pitch darkness and a wide, wide starry sky... If you happen to be staying or travelling in Central on such a night, take the time to chill-out and take in the skyscape. The lack of artificial light together with Central's fine weather provides crystal, clear night skies, perfect for stargazing.

The sky is divided up into 88 areas named constellations. These areas have precise boundaries so that every part of the sky fits into one constellation. Many of the traditional Greek constellations such as Orion and Pisces are also modern-day constellations. The smallest of the 88 constellations is Crux, also known as the Southern Cross, which appears on New Zealand's flag.

Just which constellations you can see in the night sky depends very much on when you look. Different constellations are visible at different times of the year and at different times of the night. The Earth's rotation accounts for changes during the night and the Earth's orbit around the sun causes seasonal changes.

If you are interested in spending some time stargazing head to the less populated areas of Otago. If you are not an experienced telescope user a good pair of binoculars will be much easier to use and will provide a great deal of enjoyment exploring the night sky. Arm yourself with a starmap or planisphere to help you identify different stars and constellations. Some constellations that you can see in our skies include the Southern Cross, which can be seen all year round, and Orion, which is to the north in summer.



Matariki, or Pleiades



The Southern Cross and pointer stars, Alpha and Beta Centauri



Photo: ODT www.otagoimages.co.nz