

Camping Amongst the Constellations

Get out and admire our galaxy's dramatic galactic core—a sparkly bulge of stars and gas we call the Milky Way—while summer's short viewing season lasts

Stephanie Vermillion

The only thing better than sleeping under the stars is camping beneath the Milky Way's glittery galactic center, and now is the best time to do that. July and August provide dazzling, nearly all-night views of the core of our spiral galaxy, a luminous bulge of stars, dust, and gas. But seeing the Milky Way does require a bit of planning—something I'm currently in the throes of as I plot summer astrophotography expeditions from New Mexico to Maine.

Here's how and when you can spot the Milky Way this summer, plus seven of the country's best destinations for galaxy gazing.

When Is the Best Time to See the Milky Way?

You can technically see a portion of the Milky Way all year, but you can't always admire the photogenic core. That's due to our solar system's location, as well as Earth's rotation around the sun.

The Milky Way is a spiral galaxy, and our solar system lies on its outer fringes. From late November through January, the sun hovers between the galactic center and Earth. We can still see our galaxy's outer reaches—a spray of bright stars and space dust—but the real treat hits in spring, when we move far enough around the sun for the Milky Way's galactic center to come back into view.

The core is visible in the early morning hours from spring into early summer, and for a few hours after dusk in the fall. But July and August deliver eye-popping, and nearly all-night views of our galaxy's interior—if you're in the right place at the right time.

How Can I See the Milky Way?

Darkness is a must if you hope to see the Milky Way core. You need inky skies, and that starts with avoiding artificial light. I use light pollution maps and scout DarkSky International's lineup of certified spots to plan my stargazing outings.

Timing is also important. Schedule your Milky Way pursuits for around five nights before and after a new moon to avoid lunar light.

And consider the light you produce out in the field. It takes our eyes about 30 minutes to adjust to the dark after exposure to bright white light. That includes your phone. Once you're safely in your stargazing spot, switch to a red-light headlamp to help preserve your night vision (or ditch light entirely), and turn off your phone. If you do need the latter to check stargazing apps or weather and safety alerts, use this hack for a shortcut to turn your phone's

Where Can I See the Milky Way in the United States?

Northerly destinations may get the best aurora views, but the Milky Way core, which travels above the southern horizon near the Sagittarius constellation, is much more visible in the lower 48 states. That's why I focus my domestic stargazing trips on the contiguous U.S. ■

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Image: John Gally

Galaxy Quest

Here are seven of the best places to see the Milky Way across the country, and the top reasons why we recommend them.

1. Greater Big Bend International Dark Sky Reserve, Texas

The darkest skies in the contiguous U.S., offering unmatched clarity for Milky Way viewing.

2. Capitol Reef National Park, Utah

Remote desert isolation with minimal light pollution for uninterrupted galaxy gazing.

3. Chaco Canyon National Historic Park, New Mexico

Ancient ruins and dark skies converge at a UNESCO site with deep astronomical roots.

4. Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, Maine

One of the few certified DarkSky Sanctuaries in the East, with wide-open, star-filled skies.

5. Keweenaw Peninsula, Michigan

A rare chance to see both the Milky Way and the northern lights from the same lakeside perch.

6. Cherry Springs State Park, Pennsylvania

The premier Milky Way-viewing destination in the East, known for its regulated dark-sky zones.

7. Sinks Canyon State Park, Wyoming

Stargazing among dramatic mountain landscapes in Wyoming's first DarkSky certified park.

International Dark Sky Places (IDSP) is a program run by DarkSky International. Learn more at www.darksky.org