



Elephant Rock, Valley of Fire
CREDIT: Travel Nevada/Sydney Martinez

The Magic of Southern Nevada's Dark Summer Skies

By Stephanie Forté

The story went that when viewed from outer space, Las Vegas was the most luminous place on Earth. It seemed plausible—but the truth is that more densely populated cities like Hong Kong, Los Angeles, and New York give off a lot more light. But what does shine are Nevada's velvety dark skies—perfect for stargazing.

Nevada has become a destination for people looking to see the stars. Massacre Rim, 101,000 acres in the state's northwest corner, is one of 17 Dark Sky Sanctuaries worldwide. Great Basin National Park's tagline is *Half the Park is After Dark*; its stunning star shows lure visitors. Despite its urban sprawl, Southern Nevada also has places to revel in the magic of the Milky Way.

Last year, Las Vegas landed on a top-10 list of "Best Cities for Stargazing." That's thanks to nearby public lands protected from light pollution. Today, light pollution impacts 99 percent of Americans and more than 80 percent of the world's population. It's why many adults and kids have never experienced a night sky. "We regularly have people at our events say they've never seen the Milky Way. To me, that's like going through life without seeing trees or flowers," said John Heller, Las Vegas Astronomical Society (LVAS) president.

LVAS is a volunteer organization, a group of passionate astronomers hungry to share their knowledge and a wide array of telescopes. They host free public stargazing events open to people of all ages. Monthly events are held on Saturdays between the new moon—when there's no visible moon—and the first quarter moon. Along with moonless nights, the Vegas Valley's dry air and clear skies make it a great place to see the stars.

WHERE TO GO

Higher altitudes west and northwest of the city are best. LVAS has hosted events at Kyle Canyon and Red Rock Canyon Visitor Centers, Skye Canyon in the northwest, along with the Clark County Wetlands. Other "dark" places to see the stars include Nelson's Landing on Lake Mohave, Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Valley of Fire, and Death Valley National Park.

The newly minted Avi Kwa Ame National Monument is another favorite. About an hour from Las Vegas, local stargazers like the secluded Joshua tree forest on the eastern boundary of the Wee Thump Wilderness Area. Spots on Wee Thump Road have pullouts with parking and firepits. (From Las Vegas, take US 95 S to NV-164 West/Nipton Rd. The turn-off is on the right, about 1.5 miles past Walking Box Ranch.)

DARK SKY PROTECTION

As Las Vegas grows, city lights pose a risk. "In the past 10 years, Red Rock's sky has become noticeably brighter," said Keith Caceres, LVAS event director.

Public land advocacy groups work hard to preserve our dark skies. And for a good reason. "Pristine night skies provide a healthy sense of awe and help us think of the realities beyond our digital and material lives," said Heller.

Dark skies also help our health. Light pollution can have devastating effects on wildlife and humans. It's attributed to increased anxiety, stress, and headaches. Light pollution also reduces melatonin production, resulting in sleepless nights and daytime fatigue.

According to the National Institute of Health, studies indicate a connection between reduced melatonin levels and cancer.

Locally, measures are being taken to safeguard our night skies. In 2022, Boulder City received a nearly \$2 million government grant to retrofit municipal lights. The new energy-efficient, light-pollution-reducing fixtures will relieve the harmful impact of light pollution while preserving dark sky recreation like stargazing.

SUMMER SKY EVENTS

For desert dwellers, summer nights offer a reprieve from the sun's intensity and a chance to connect with nature. In the northern hemisphere, summer is when the night sky faces the bright center of our galaxy in the hours before midnight. It's also the best time to view the Milky Way with the naked eye or telescope.

A summer sky highlight is the Perseid Meteor Shower. In 2023, it's from July 14 through September 1. The shower appears to radiate from the constellation Perseus, hence its name, and will peak in the northeast sky on August 13. The peak is when visibility is best—and this year, that date is also a new moon, making for even better conditions. However, there are still great viewing opportunities two weeks before and after the peak. Head to Echo Bay at Lake Mead NRA or Valley of Fire to see the shower. (Only overnight campers can stay at Valley of Fire after dark.)

Whether you're looking to see the Milky Way or a meteor shower, pick a dark location that isn't obstructed by an urban glow. For example, to see a meteor shower radiating from the northeast sky, avoid a viewing spot that's south of Las Vegas, where you'd have to look through the city's lights to see it.



Cathedral Gorge
CREDIT: Travel Nevada/Michael Okimoto



UP YOUR INSTAGRAM GAME

Amateur photographers can capture images of August's meteor shower. For best results, mount a camera capable of shooting with long shutter speeds on a tripod. "Modern cellphone cameras in astrophotography mode can probably manage it, too," said Caceres. His tips on photographing the meteor shower:

1. For shots that capture random meteor streaks, point your camera toward the constellation Perseus.
2. If possible, set the camera in a time-lapse mode where it's shooting continuous photos with a 10 to 20-second shutter speed, around ISO 1600-3200.
3. For an added touch, frame the shot with something interesting in the foreground or a lovely silhouette.

Regardless of where you visit, be sure to get out and appreciate our dark skies. "The stars have inspired countless poets, writers, explorers, lovers, and the curious to create astronomy, humankind's first science. I think continuing that sense of wonder and curiosity is important," said Caceres.

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CREDIT: Las Vegas Astronomical Society/Keith Caceres

STARGAZING GEAR LIST

The best way to see a meteor shower is with the naked eye. A wide field of view means seeing fast-moving meteors, whereas a zoomed-in telescope can be too limiting. For other starry events, consider a pair of astronomical binoculars like Orion's 7x50 Scenix binoculars (\$100). A table-top reflector telescope, like the AWB OneSky Reflector, is an LVAS recommendation for beginner astronomers with a little more cash to burn (\$250).

LVAS SUMMER EVENTS

To meet other local amateur astronomers, check out LVAS' monthly meetings at the Dale Etheridge Planetarium on the North Las Vegas campus of the College of Southern Nevada. The group also schedules summer gazing events that include a gathering at Mt. Charleston Visitor Center on July 22nd. Visit www.lvastronomy.org for info and additional events.

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