

# Stargazing and Dark Sky Tourism



**A toolkit to help your tourism SME  
welcome stargazers and dark sky visitors**

**EXPERIENCE  
WEST SUSSEX**

# Becoming a dark sky business

Dark sky tourism is an effective way to differentiate your business from the competition, extend the visitor season and boost overnight stays in West Sussex. And the good news is you don't need a degree in astrophysics to offer your visitors a memorable experience beneath the night skies!

Stargazing is just one aspect of dark sky tourism, which was growing in popularity even before the pandemic. Lonely Planet touted dark skies as a key travel trend for 2019 and it continues to flourish. Stargazing and other dark sky activities are easy opportunities for visitors – and you – to dip a toe into experiential and sustainable tourism, both of which are experiencing increased demand. Dark sky tourism meets visitors' new, post-pandemic tastes, too, as it's naturally socially distanced, immersive and helps people feel more connected – to each other, to nature and to the universe.

West Sussex is one of the best places in England for a dark sky break, particularly for visitors wanting to escape the light pollution of the capital. Moore's Reserve in the South Downs National Park is an International Dark Sky Reserve, and a significant chunk of West Sussex sits within it. Chichester Harbour AONB is a dark sky hotspot, too, with several Dark Sky Discovery Sites and Chichester Planetarium nearby.

There's something magical about gazing up at a vast sky glinting with stars, and visitors only need warm clothes, clear skies and a dark site to get started with stargazing – although there's plenty that you can do to make sure their dark sky experience in West Sussex is worth talking about.

If it's good enough for local astro-celebrities Sir Patrick Moore and Tim Peake...

This toolkit will get you started as a dark sky business, so you can help your visitors see the stars above West Sussex as confidently as you help them experience the county below. You'll learn about the best places to view the night skies, how to connect with local experts and what to do if the weather doesn't play ball.

Help your visitors see the stars above West Sussex as confidently as you help them experience the county below.

## Case study



### Dark sky tourism in Exmoor National Park

Since it was designated Europe's first Dark Sky Reserve in 2011, [Exmoor National Park](#) has developed several Dark Sky schemes, including a [festival](#), [discovery trail](#) and [telescopes for hire](#). A visitor survey in 2021 showed that 25% of visitors said that being a Dark Sky Reserve was one of the reasons they came to Exmoor.

Exmoor now has a growing number of businesses officially accredited as Dark Sky Friendly. This relatively new scheme is already receiving good engagement, with businesses starting to report that visitors are choosing them over others because they've added dark sky information to their visitor offer and website. "It is an extra string to your bow as a business," says Katrina Munro, Exmoor National Park's Sustainable Economy Officer.

Some businesses now run their own dark sky events, giving them scope for extra income. For a few, such as experience provider Wild About Exmoor, stargazing now accounts for a large part of the business.



# Glossary of dark sky terms

## Dark sky tourism

Any kind of tourism that depends on dark skies, such as night-time photography and nocturnal wildlife tours as well as stargazing. Its success largely relies on the quality of the destination's night skies.

## Astrotourism

Tourism for the express purpose of stargazing, including visiting facilities related to astronomy such as observatories.

## International Dark-Sky Association (IDA)

Organisation working to protect the night skies for future generations.

## International Dark Sky Places

A conservation programme founded by the IDA in 2001 to recognise and award destinations working to preserve their dark skies.

## International Dark Sky Reserve

Protected public or private land with high-quality starry nights and nocturnal environment. Usually consists of a 'dark core' zone with a populated periphery where policies protect the core's darkness. Moore's Reserve in the South Downs NP has been an International Dark Sky Reserve since 2016. It's one of seven in the UK, and 18 in the world.

## Dark Sky Discovery Sites

A nationwide network of great places to see the stars, nominated by local groups and organisations. As well as being open to everyone, they have free parking and often host regular stargazing events. There are currently seven in West Sussex, which are a mix of Milky Way and Orion classes.

- **Orion-class Discovery Sites:** The seven main stars of the winter constellation Orion are visible to the naked eye from Dark Sky Discovery Sites classified 'Orion'.
- **Milky Way-class Discovery Sites:** The Milky Way is visible to the naked eye from these Dark Sky Discovery Sites, which tend to be darker.

# Who's your audience?



**Part of the beauty of dark skies tourism is that it's so accessible and appealing to a wide audience.**

Couples find it romantic, and the timing of the South Downs Dark Skies Festival (February half term) makes it great for families. The October half term and Christmas holidays are prime times for stargazing, too.

Dark sky tourism also intersects a range of travel types. It can be immersive so checks the experiential box. It actively discourages light pollution and encourages interaction with nature, so it can be sustainable. And have you heard of starbathing? Like forest bathing, it's about experiencing a sense of awe and promoting mindfulness, helping improve mental health: that's wellbeing tourism.

## Case study



Dark sky tourism provides another opportunity to work with local businesses. Perhaps you have a venue but lack the expertise, or an idea for a dark sky experience but no venue. Take inspiration from the many successful dark sky collaborations around the UK, including:

**Coll & The Cosmos** is a collaboration between Coll Bunkhouse and mobile planetarium Cosmos, who work together to provide a stargazing weekend break on the Isle of Coll, an International Dark Sky Community.

In Northumberland, Battlesteads Hotel & Restaurant owns **Battlesteads Dark Sky Observatory** while **AstroVentures CIC**, a social enterprise of professional astronomers, employs the astronomers and runs the day-to-day events. Together, they offer events such as Shooting Star Suppers.

Exmoor's **Yarn Market Hotel** has teamed up with expert Bob Mizen to provide stargazing weekend breaks.



# How to start

You don't need to be an amateur astronomer or invest much money to cater for visitors who want to experience West Sussex's dark skies, but it will pay to familiarise yourself with our existing dark sky attractions, accommodation and activities, and your nearest Dark Sky Sites. Even better, make time to experience these for yourself, and to see what tourism businesses like yours are doing in other International Dark Sky Places.

[Gostargazing.co.uk](http://Gostargazing.co.uk) and [darkskydiscovery.org.uk](http://darkskydiscovery.org.uk) are useful resources for finding dark sky sites near you, including information on access and on-site facilities.

Connect with local astronomy groups to meet experts and enthusiasts who might be able to support or collaborate with your dark sky venture. [Southern Area Group of Astronomical Societies](#) has a comprehensive list of astronomy groups.

If you're considering investing in a telescope to enhance your business's dark sky offer, check out the telescope courses at [South Downs Planetarium](#).

Telescopes are expensive, and it's wise to make sure you know what you're doing with it before sharing it with your guests. Dr John Mason, the Planetarium's principal lecturer and education officer, is happy to share tips and answer your questions.

Stargazing is typically a winter activity, when the colder air means clearer skies and the longer nights give visitors more opportunities to experience the dark skies, so it's best to schedule your dark sky experiences between October and March.

If you choose to invest in a telescope, make sure you know how to work it before sharing with your guests.

## SUPPORT DARK SKY VISITORS

# Top tips



Dark sky tourism isn't only about stargazing. Night-time wildlife or photography experiences are great fun – and less weather dependent.



Dark sky tourists who stay out late will appreciate greater flexibility around dinner, breakfast and check-out times.



Counter cloud cover concerns by offering flexibility around dates and recommending inclement-weather alternatives such as planetariums and stargazing apps.



Offer a stargazing bundle with a waterproof blanket, red-light torch, snacks, Thermos flask, pocket handwarmers, folding chairs and binoculars.



Consider your external lighting. See SDNPA's [Towards a Dark Sky Standard](#) for guidance.



Based in the South Downs National Park? Check out their [Dark Skies Welcome Scheme](#).

# Marketing Magic



## Dark sky tourism brings many marketing opportunities

First, make sure your dark sky experience and any steps you're taking to support West Sussex's dark skies features on your website.

Getting involved with dark sky tourism offers up many more content ideas for your social channels, blog and newsletter. As well as promoting your own product, you can highlight local events and spectacles in the world of astronomy, such as lunar eclipses, harvest moons and meteor showers.

Collaborating on a dark sky tourism product can also increase your reach, as you and your partner(s) share each other's content with your audiences.

Having a dark sky experience means more opportunities to feature in local and national campaigns, too. Experience West Sussex has a Dark Skies landing page on their website, with relevant visitor itineraries and tourism business listings.

Host an event for the [South Downs Dark Skies Festival](#) and you'll be listed on their website and possibly featured in newsletters and social media. You can also get involved in supporting – and even entering – the SDNP's annual [astrophotography competition](#); entries are shared by the SDNPA on social media during the Festival.

## Find out more

[Southern Area Group of Astronomical Societies](#)

[International Dark Sky Association](#)

[Experience West Sussex Dark skies and stargazing itineraries for visitors](#)

[Dark Sky calendar](#)

[South Downs National Park: Towards a Dark Sky Standard](#)

[South Downs National Park: How to become a Dark Skies business](#)

[South Downs Dark Skies Festival](#)