SPACE NEWS

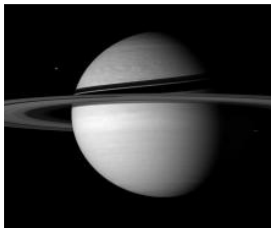
N° 10 7th January 2008

Last week in space

Finally, astronomy is going to get the respect it deserves. The United Nations announced recently that 2009 will be the International Year of Astronomy. There'll be a concerted effort around the world to increase awareness about astronomy, and give people access to tools, techniques and knowledge. The year coincides with 400 years since Galileo Galilei first pointed his telescope towards the heavens. He then went on to discover mountains and craters on the Moon, and the four major moons of Jupiter. You can visit the IYA 09 web site here: www.astronomy2009.org

Try to walk on Mars today, and the planet will simultaneously freeze and suffocate you. Not to mention the minimal air pressure and relentless radiation from space. But billions of years ago, the Red Planet was much warmer and liquid water flowed on its surface. Warm temperatures on Earth are maintained by the carbon cycle, but maybe another greenhouse gas - sulphur dioxide (SO2) - maintained the temperatures on Mars. For more information, take a look here: http://harvardscience.harvard.edu/node/20056

The space-borne telescope, COROT (Convection, Rotation and planetary Transits), has just completed its first year in orbit. The observatory has brought in surprises after over 300 days of scientific observations. Pioneering precision measurement over long periods of time COROT is observing a large number of stars, up to 12 000, simultaneously, at a very high precision - unprecedented in ground-based astronomy. The key to the high-precision is that the observations can be carried out over very long periods of time, up to 150 days. For more information, take a look here: www.esa.int/SPECIALS/COROT/SEMF0C2MDAF_0.html



If you were on the surface of Saturn, how long would a day last? This has remained a mystery for scientists, because the thick clouds of gas obscure the surface of the planet from direct observation by telescopes or orbiters. Below all those clouds there is a surface that rotates at a constant speed. Since scientists can't directly *see* the surface, they've taken another approach: listening. For more information, take a look here: www.esa.int/esaSC/SEMB0RJV3AF_index_0.html

Not to be missed next week

Try spotting comet Tuttle (magnitude 5.7) early this week, in the constellation of the Whale.

Monday 7th January: The asteroid 6 Hebe (magnitude 9.5) can be found about 40 minutes from omicron Leo, a star of magnitude 3.8 in the constellation of the Lion.

Thursday 10th January: The asteroid 15 Eunomia (magnitude 8.2) can be found about 2° North of NGC 2420 in the constellation of the Twins.

Saturday 12th January: Close encounter of the Moon with Uranus; 2 hours after sunset the two will be about 4° apart, i.e. in the same field of view in a pair of binoculars.