

## A Night at the Cameron Park Community Observatory

The docent arrives before the night actually starts. Many tasks are accomplished before any stars are visible and before any patrons come wandering up the long driveway. Gates are opened, buildings are unlocked. Smaller scopes are dragged into position outside the entrance of the observatory; they are appetizers to be enjoyed in preparation for the main course of the larger mounted telescopes inside. The quiet hum of small machines echoes in the rooms, drenched in red lights that protect one's night vision. The sun sinks below the horizon; the crescent moon appears and stars wink out of the purple sky. All is ready.

Streaks of white light run across the hillside as vehicles circle through the lower parking lot, alerting the docents of new arrivals. Their voices carry through the oak trees surrounding the parking lot: the sounds of running children, protective mothers, and quiet laughter prevail. Small troops of visitors trek up the driveway. The night begins.

The telescopes are typically already poised, pointing at an object and waiting for a curious eye. The early arrivals usually receive more personal interaction with the docents, however, they must often wait for the sky to darken enough for the use of the telescopes.

As the observatory fills with visitors, several areas of activity attract groups like magnets. The new arrivals gather around the outdoor scopes, often looking at larger objects such as the Moon or planets. Within the observing room, there are lines to use the west scope, which has an eyepiece and is used for traditional naked eye observing, and the east scope, which is connected to a television screen and is used to display objects. When they want to take a break from the scopes, the visitors take a few minutes to watch film selections in the entrance room. This is the meeting place for all ages: students, parents, the elderly, anyone desiring a peek into the darkness.

After the last visitors trickle out, a flurry of activity begins. White lights are turned back on to facilitate the work, their first blinding flash causing the docents to squint for several minutes as they continue their tasks. The scopes are moved into their storage position and freed of their eyepieces. The mirrors and lenses are covered from the dust drifting in the air. The eyepieces are nestled back into their boxes arranged neatly in a desk drawer. The various computers and televisions are shut off, restoring the silence of the sunset. The docent's name tags are hung on a hook on the wall. The doors are locked and the security system is armed. All that is left of the night's work is the glowing lettering on the docent shirts, bouncing away down the driveway, away from the small square building, the gateway to the cosmos.

The Cameron Park Community Observatory is open to the public Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights from 7:30 PM to 9:30 PM. To find out more, visit [communityobservatory.org](http://communityobservatory.org).