

What if They Let YOU Run the Hubble?

It is probably the dream of any amateur astronomer to be able to be the boss of one of the great multi million dollar telescopes even if it was just for one hour or for a few shots. Sure, we can have a lot of fun with our binoculars. And as we improve our personal equipment set, we get better and better at pinpointing what we want to see in the sky.

But there is only so far we can go within the constraints of a family budget in building the perfect telescopic operation. Probably the next level then is to work together with others in your astronomy club. By pooling our resources, we can make more progress both in acquiring much more sophisticated equipment and in synchronizing our telescopic operations.

All of this is good and its fun to tweak it and play with it always finding improvements. But when we are sitting back and dreaming, it's those big institutional size telescopes that really grab our interest. Maybe you have had a chance to visit one at Kitt Peak, Arizona, Mauna Kea, Hawaii, Palomar Mountain, California or Mt. Locke, Texas to name just a few and as you walked around jaw dropped to your shoes, you thought, maybe if I could just run it for an hour, how awesome would that be?

The good news is that while these huge observatories are not going to let you come in and turn the gears of the mightiest telescopes yourself, many of them will perform specific observations for you and allow you to "see through their eyes" via the internet for that short observation. This is a powerful option for an amateur astronomer and one you want to prepare for carefully. Here is what you do...

1. Begin compiling a list of the great telescopes of the world, their locations and how to contact them. Google will help you with finding lists of these observatories to contact by pointing you to specific directory sites like <http://astro.nineplanets.org/bigeyes.html>
2. You can start by submitting your request to a specific observatory. Now here is where you have to do your homework. If you have a specific celestial event you wish to observe, there will be particular telescopes around the globe that will be in the best position to get those shots for you. So study up and find just the right telescope and when the perfect moment for that observation would occur. Get out ahead of this homework as you need to submit your request in plenty of time for it to go through approval and for them to get back to you and to interact with you to nail down what you are going to have them look at.
3. There are two ways you can direct the operators of the telescopes. You can give them specific coordinates to focus on and a specific time frame to perform the observation. The other way is to give them a star, a planet or a particular star system to observe and let them figure out the coordinates. That might be easier because you know what you want to see.
4. Now you sit back and wait for the email that the observation is done.

You will not be able to watch them do the observation dynamically. That would be nice but it just isn't possible yet. These are telescopes, not web cams. But they will post the pictures from your observation on a particular web location and email the results to you for study.

It's pretty cool, free and customized to what you requested. And you can brag to your friends as you make color copies of your shots that you had Kitt Peak do these up for you personally. And you would not be lying.

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