

High Country News

For people who care about the West

Carpe Noctem

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I pledge devotion to the stars of the majestic Milky Way Galaxy and to a dark night sky in which they shine; one cosmos, overhead, clearly visible, with liberty from light and dark skies for all.

-- Jack Troeger, Dark Sky Initiative

In 2001, Florida developer and amateur astronomer Gene Turner came to southeastern Arizona in search of "the new frontier." He found it in a sky darker than any he had ever seen. Inspired, he promptly bought up 450 acres near the town of Portal to create an "astronomy community."

Six years later, all 85 parcels in the Arizona Sky Village have been purchased, and many now boast custom homes with observatories. Construction is underway on 11 "interval ownership haciendas," or time-share homes, complete with 14-inch computerized telescopes located in private open-air observation courtyards.

All exclusive communities have covenants, but the rules of the Arizona Sky Village reflect its unusual purpose: Curtains must be light-blocking, so that no light leaks out at night and only low wattage-bulbs "with full cut-off" (meaning that no light goes up) can be used outside at night.

According to Turner, the success of his venture stems from the first thing he did after seeing the property: He got on the phone with his friend Jack Newton, astrophotographer extraordinaire, whose images of the night sky have appeared in such prestigious publications as *Astronomy Magazine*, the German magazine *Sterne und Weltraum* and *National Geographic*.

Newton and his wife, Alice, had already started an astronomy community in Chiefland, Fla.— a village of stargazers that just "happened" because the Newtons were there with their telescopes. In fact, that's how Turner met them in the first place; he was the second person to come to their door at Chiefland, eager to join the community.

From Arizona, Turner called Newton and said, "Jack, you're in the wrong place."

His rave about Portal convinced Newton to buy in. "It's an extraordinary place, the location is second to none," Turner rhapsodizes. "You've got 10,000-foot mountains coming down to desert, five of seven life zones, ponderosa to cactus. You've got the mountains blocking Tucson and Sierra Vista, you've got an extremely dry climate with no light domes." (Water vapor reflects and disperses light.)

With Newton on board, Turner sold the rest of the parcels quickly. "It's kinda like a golf course," Turner says. "You get the right pro, in this case an astronomy pro, and people come to rub shoulders with him."

The people who have bought property are "mostly biologists, retired writers and poets" between 50 and 70 years of age, according to Turner – many with an interest in horseback riding and bird-watching, and all with an enthusiasm for astronomy.

Turner's own love for the night sky stems from the 1960s, the moon race and Carl Sagan's books: "He presented space passionately, more emotionally, a little spiritual, less scientific. It touches something inside, looking at other galaxies up close and personal."

At Arizona Sky Village, the stars do seem closer. The less the magnitude, the brighter the star, and at the village the less-bright stars -- those of the 7th magnitude -- are visible to the naked eye. With telescopes (ranging from 14 to 30 inches) you can get spectacular glimpses of such faraway beauties as the Orion Nebula. Some part-time residents – like the Newtons, who live six months of the year in Canada at their astronomy-themed bed and breakfast – keep any eye on Portal's skies via computer-controlled cameras.

Just a few issues worry Turner, who insists he's never leaving southeastern Arizona. There's the lack of medical facilities, for one – with all its older residents, Portal could use a clinic with good cardiac care. Another issue – the relationship of the village with the neighboring community – seems to be resolving itself. "At first, there was quite a bit of anxiety over this 'quote development unquote,' " says Turner. "I took quite a bit of heat. But I think now the community loves the people we have here. We sign up as EMTs, for example. Well... they probably still don't like me, because land values went up about a thousand percent ...

"We got lucky -- we got here first to preserve this dark sky."

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