To boldly go where no man has gone before © Astro Village

# Swiss 'astro' retreat offers pie in the sky to stargazers

by Marta Falconi
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**An "astronomical" retreat in the Swiss Alps caters for short vacations in a pristine environment with the opportunity to observe the night sky, learn about constellations and take sophisticated pictures of heavenly bodies. Founded by two Czech doctors with a passion for the science, the Astro Village in Lue, eastern Switzerland, is an oasis of beautiful landscapes, clear nights and top-notch technology.**

The Astro Village's main attractions rest on a sunny terrace at 1,935 metres of altitude. The three white domes, each equipped with high-end motorized telescopes and other technology for amateur astrophotography are, quite literally, the stars of this retreat.

The domes are the highlight of what visitors can experience when booking an astronomical holiday at the Lue-Stailas Alpine Astro Village in Lue, a village of 63 residents in eastern Switzerland.

Overlooking the valley of Muestair, the retreat offers the chance to vacation in a beautiful mountain region and scan the sky in search of the perfect astro subject to immortalize.

"It's quite a unique centre in Europe, visitors have the possibility to come here, rent accommodation, telescopes and laptops and carry out their imaging or astrophotography project," said Dr. Vaclav Ourednik, who, together with his wife Jitka, founded the village last year.

"The difference with other observatories around the world is that the experience here lasts more than a bunch of minutes spent standing at a telescope."

Visitors can rent out the equipment for deep sky photography or wide field imaging (dome rentals vary from 130 to 150 francs per night, depending on the technical set-up). Accommodation consists of three one-room and two two-room apartments (single occupancy at a one-room apartment costs 115 francs).

Horsehead nebula snap from Astro Village telescope

Other facilities include common areas where visitors can process obtained data, discuss observations, or attend meetings, courses and seminars.

Although the art of astrophotography relies on technology, it also requires patience. "You barely see the object you photograph. You need exposures that can last up to several hours, then there's all the computer work to process the image," Ourednik said.

Photographs can be printed out, archived and taken home. "We admire the bodies from our solar system, the sun, the moon, the planets, the Milky Way, with its swaths of stars and dust belts, other galaxies . . . When we take pictures, we image things we could never see with our eyes - that is absolutely fascinating."

Also available at the retreat are telescopes for public observations and courses for beginners who want to make themselves familiar with the sky.

"It’s an overall vacation package, an astronomer does not have to leave the family behind to go to some remote viewing point," Ourednik told Swisster. "People who are not interested in the stars can go hiking in the area, or do some sightseeing."

Surrounded by extended mountain chains, the spot is sheltered from light pollution and storms. The high altitude allows astrophotographers to enjoy clear skies that are out of reach of most stratus cloud limits.

The location offers optimal conditions for sky-gazing, with an average 130 clear nights every year, Ourednik said.

Hundreds of visitors from both Europe and the United States have come to stay, especially during Pluto's recent star occultation.

While visitors do not require technical experience to attend the courses and star-gazing events, a certain degree of knowledge is required to operate the domes.

These can also be remotely activated from the apartments, such as when temperatures drop below zero, making it possible for guests to experience the cosmos from their room.

Ourednik said he and his wife hope the Astro Village will become an aggregation point in Europe for all sky photographers, both amateurs and professionals.

"What Jitka and I like about the Universe is the possibility to explore the past of essentially everything," Ourednik said.

"Every time we look through the telescope or do imaging, we are looking thousands or even billions of years into the past and see a rich and dynamic environment, where stars and galaxies are born and die, merge and evolve."

"On a clear night at the scope, we feel the immensity of the Universe above us and still feel that we are clearly a part of it," he said.

Born in Prague, Vaclav and Jitka Ourednik met in Switzerland during studys for their PhD in neuroscience. With their Astro Village, they blended their passion for astronomy with that for nature and photography.