

The last time I took an interest in the night sky was when I set my alarm for three in the morning and stumbled outside to see one of the most spectacular comets to visit our corner of the solar system in the past century. I remember looking up and thinking what people in earlier, less scientific ages would have made of its impressive tail – a traditional portent of doom.

That was in 1997, about three weeks before Tony Blair was elected. There is nothing quite as impressive as Comet Hale-Bopp this year, but I have come to a remote East Anglian caravan park to see whether Mark Thompson, the “People’s Astronomer” and presenter on BBC1’s *The One Show*, can rekindle my interest in the heavens on an ordinary Friday evening in the cosmos. Even better, I want to see whether it will spark something in the mind of my 14-year-old son, Theodore.

You have to make your own fun in rural Norfolk, but it turns out that stargazing is one hobby better practised here than anywhere else in southern England. We are 20 miles from any sizeable town and the orange glow that permeates the sky over most of Britain is mercifully over the horizon. In spite of a thin sheen of cloud that is creating a halo around the moon we are almost immediately treated to a sight denied to big city-dwellers: Saturn’s rings.

I never thought I’d see Saturn’s rings so easily from Earth. To the naked eye, the planet could easily be mistaken for a star, but magnify it 250 times and it acquires handlebars, a bit like the shape of the London Underground symbol. About 10 diameters away we can even make out one of Saturn’s approximately 80 moons.

Then it is swiftly off to Mars. Astronomy has changed a bit since I was a child. It seems a bit like cheating as Mark takes out a gadget like a TV remote control, selects “Mars” – and a whirring motor shifts his telescope to the exact spot. It has certainly saved Mark the embarrassment he suffered during one of his lectures a few years ago when he pointed the telescope to a bright light and told his audience “... and here’s Jupiter”. Then he saw a couple of flashing lights alongside and realised it was more likely a Ryanair special heading for Stansted.

Not only will Mark’s telescope find a star or planet for you, it will keep on tracking the planet as it moves across the sky. Insert a webcam into the eyepiece of the telescope and you suddenly have Saturn: the movie – in fact Mark shows me one he has made earlier.

Astronomy is not the cheapest hobby. The cheapest telescope of any practical use, says Mark, is a mirror telescope costing about £200. Mark’s 5ft telescope costs £5,000, and the tripod on



Hooked on stargazing

In darkest East Anglia, **Ross Clark** and his son reach for the sky with ‘the People’s Astronomer’, Mark Thompson

TIPS

- Before you buy a telescope, go out to the country and have a look at the stars.
- Get a planisphere – a diagram of stars visible from Earth – and try picking out the brightest stars, planets and constellations.
- Buy a red torch. It takes an hour for the eye to adjust to the dark. If you try to read a chart with an ordinary torch, the light will ruin the adjustment.
- Join an astronomical society. Visit the Federation of Astronomical Societies website at www.fedaastro.org.uk
- For details of astronomical events, visit the International Astronomical Union website at www.iau.org
- See Mark Thompson’s website at www.thepeoplesastronomer.tv

which it is sitting another £3,000. But for that you get some kit that only a university could have afforded a generation ago.

“With the stuff you can buy off the shelf now, you can do things that professional astronomers were doing 20 to 30 years ago,” Mark says. “Professionals and amateurs are working together now. Anyone who sees anything interesting can report it to the International Astronomical Union.”

You might, if you stare long enough, catch one of the 10 or so exploding stars a year that are visible from Earth. You could help search for the next comet. At the extreme end of the spectrum you might even discover an asteroid heading straight for Earth and help reduce the toll of a massive natural disaster by getting, say, Glasgow evacuated in time. You probably won’t do this, but you never know: an asteroid strike is thought to have contributed to the extinction of the large dinosaurs, while the last big strike was little over a century ago on June 30 1908 when several hundred square miles of pine forest were singed by an exploding fireball. It was in Siberia and only one death was recorded – a reindeer-herder about 20 miles from the impact.

The attraction on Mars is its volcanoes and the faint outline of that planet’s polar caps – which consist of carbon dioxide. The cloud is beginning to close in. Theodore thinks he can make out the caps, but I am not quite so sure. After a while we tire of the slow pace of Martian life. Mark picks up the remote control and we buzz off to the Moon instead. To me, it is the most interesting sight of the evening. Home in, and at first it is a bit like staring at an Artex ceiling. Then I begin to pick out individual craters – the smallest of which we can see are about 25 miles across. Crater-watching is another challenge for amateur astronomers: several times a year the Moon gains another crater as it is struck by a loose lump of rock (the Moon suffers far more strikes than the Earth because it has no atmosphere, meaning there is nothing to burn up the rock).

We feel we could watch the Moon all night, searching for craters, mountain ranges and the odd Clanger stumbling about. Disappointingly, Mark’s telescope is not quite powerful enough to pick out the spot in the Sea of Tranquility where Apollo 11 landed in 1969 – though Nasa did manage to photograph the site from a satellite last year.

With a large bed of cloud blowing in off the North Sea, that was sadly it for the evening. But there is some impressive viewing coming up, weather permitting. “Between April 8 and 15 there is a cracking opportunity to see Mercury, just after sunset,” Mark says.

Star-gazers will be hoping for a thundery day – which is when, between the clouds, the air is at its clearest. Theodore and I agree we will have a go looking for it. Stars are fine, but it is the chance of seeing the surface of planets that has really got us hooked.

Captivated: Mark Thompson, left, with Theodore and Ross Clark