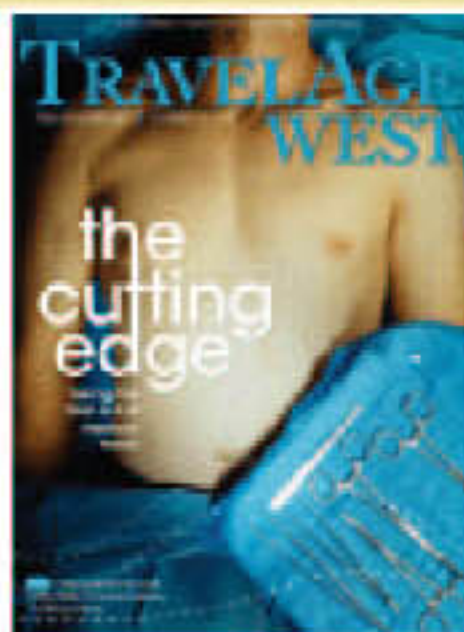


SEARCH BY KEYWORD

SEARCH BY ISSUE

READ CURRENT ISSUE



ADD ARTICLE TO 'BUILD A BROCHURE'

Create and e-mail clients a customized electronic brochure with articles, briefs and features

E-MAIL NOW

E-mail this article — send a customized message with this article to a client

HAWAII LINKS

E-mail a text message or link directly to supplier websites

>> REGISTER NOW

One-time registration provides unlimited access and use of all electronic marketing tools.

HAWAII

Sharing the Sky

Astro Tours gets clients close to the stars

by Marty Wentzel
10/31/2005



backyard, where his observatory perches on a hill above urban west Oahu, 25 miles from Honolulu. Across the plains to the east and south, Honolulu city lights spread out like a glimmering blanket, but to the north and west, it was dark.

"Those are undeveloped preservation lands, so conditions here are optimal for celestial studies," said Young. "I grew up in Honolulu, but I've slowly been moving farther and farther out of town so I can practice astronomy in unpolluted skies."

Using a lighted pointer, he introduced me to the constellations visible to the naked eye and talked about their significance, while Hawaiian owls added haunting hoots from nearby woods.

An astronomy buff since childhood, Young fulfilled a dream by designing and building his own observatory in 1993.

"I always wanted to share the sky with others," he said, "so I started inviting friends over for evenings under the stars."

In 1996, he turned his hobby into a visitor-friendly business by launching Astro Tours Hawaii, creating a Web site for the venture last year.

"But even when I don't have any customers, I'm still out here every night," he said.

We walked into the observatory, its high walls blocking the glare from neighboring houses. Compact and cozy, it provides room for as many as six people at a time, with comfortable seating. Young flicked a switch and the retractable roof slowly opened. Goose-bumpy New Age music heightened the drama as the astral

■ Add article to 'Build a Brochure'

■ E-mail now

■ Printer-Friendly

CLICK & WIN

Play for a chance to win an iPod shuffle from

TRAVELAGE WEST

CLICK HERE!



2006
Hotel & Travel Index
Digital Edition

RESOURCE CORNER

■ Maps

■ Time Zones

■ Currency Converter

spectacle appeared before our eyes.

On this particularly clear night, we studied planets like Saturn, Jupiter and Mars. The Milky Way shimmered, nebulas glowed, star clusters sparkled and the moon showed off its impact craters and volcanic domes.

Young's gentle nature and soft voice created a peaceful presence during this awe-inspiring tour of the heavens. His state-of-the-art computers communicated with the telescopes and gadgets with mind-boggling precision and speed. We peered through equipment with lofty names like Maksutov Cassegrain, and he even let me take command of a scope, steering it to certain orbs of interest.

Young has covered the walls of the observatory with photographs, charts and illustrations to which he refers while talking about the mysteries of the night sky.

"Hawaii is a great place for astronomers because it's close to the equator, so we can look at both the Northern and Southern hemispheres," he explained.

And while Young's setup pales in comparison to the international observatories atop the Big Island's 13,796-foot Mauna Kea volcano, "my house is a lot easier to get to," he joked.

Along with his Web site, Young has been promoting Astro Tours Hawaii by placing flyers at the nearby JW Marriott Ihilani Resort and Spa. He keeps his guided tours small, so all of his guests get plenty of time at the telescopes and binoculars. For special occasions, however, he hosts Star Parties for groups of 30 to 40 people, who spread out blankets on the lawn and take turns in the observatory. Just as he would for friends who stop by, Young and his wife provide snacks and warm drinks to keep clients warm on cool tropical evenings at the 1,100-foot elevation.

While his product appeals to all ages, Young's tours have especially attracted the attention of the older travel market.

"A lot of retirees are expressing an interest in astronomy," he said. "They have expendable income, and they want to set up their own telescopes. They ask me lots of questions, and I'm happy to advise them."

But Young particularly enjoys it when families sign up for a tour.

"I like introducing people to the stars when they're young, the age I was when I first got hooked," he explained. "When you see a comet or a planet or a constellation, it's just so mesmerizing. It's a constant source of beauty throughout your life."

THE DETAILS

Astro Tours Hawaii
Kapolei, HI 96707
808-398-6933
www.astrotourshawaii.com

Evening stargazing tours get under way nightly at 7:30 p.m. Rates are \$35 per adult, \$20 per child ages 6-17 and free for kids under 6. Group rates are available. Transportation is included with a four-person minimum.

Commission: 20 percent on groups of 10 or more.