

Astronomy gear to get you started

You can look at the stars using binoculars, but you can't match the experience of a proper telescope. **Nick Dall** suggests three options.



FOR BEGINNERS

Celestron Astromaster 70AZ

This is a refracting telescope, which uses lenses to magnify what you're looking at much like a camera lens does. It's an impressive offering, even if you don't take the meagre price tag into consideration.

It's small, tough and portable and it comes with a lightweight steel tripod. Another bonus is that it delivers an "erect" image, which means you can use it to check out whales from the deck of your B&B in Hermanus. (The other telescopes featured deliver inverted images – flipping the image is not necessary when viewing distant objects in deep space.)

The only downside is that it's not very powerful. The Astromaster 90 delivers better magnification, but it will set you back R2 900.

Cost: R1 600 at the Telescope Shop

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FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

Orion Skyquest XT6 Classic Dobsonian

A reflecting telescope uses mirrors instead of lenses. It can capture more light than a refracting telescope and it delivers brighter, more detailed images of deep space as a result.

Reflector scopes are also known as Newtonians, after their famous inventor. This one comes on a Dobsonian base – a horseshoe-shaped, rotating wooden contraption invented by John Dobson in the 1960s – which greatly reduces the cost of the scope and allows for easy navigation of the night sky.

This scope weighs 6 kg and it's quite fragile. Once you've set it up on the 9,5 kg base, however, you can move it around easily. It might offer great value for money, but it's completely manual (like the Astromaster) so you'll have to find the stars yourself.

Cost: R4 030 at the Telescope Shop

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GETTING SERIOUS

Celestron Advanced VX 8-inch Schmidt-Cassegrain

This catadioptric scope uses a combination of lenses and mirrors. The result? You can see very distant objects extremely clearly. In tandem with a D-SLR camera, this makes it great for astrophotography.

The 8-inch Schmidt-Cassegrain design is fancy terminology for an 84% better light-gathering capacity than a traditional 6-inch scope, but almost more impressive is the automated Advanced VX mount it comes with: You'll be able to find planets, constellations and nebulae at the push of a button.

It's bigger and not as portable as the other telescopes featured, but look through the viewfinder and you'll see that it's better in almost every other way.

Cost: R26 500 at the Telescope Shop,

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EXCUSE ME, I'M LOOKING FOR MARS...

Unless you get an automated telescope, you'll need some help navigating the night sky. The best book for South African skies is *The Star Gazer's Deep Space Atlas* by Wayne Mitchell. Unfortunately it's currently out of print, but you can buy a CD containing the PDF version for R130 at the Telescope Shop (☎ telescopeshop.co.za). Also consider the ASSA annual edition of *Sky Guide Africa South* (R100 at ☎ kalahari.com).

These days there are also loads of cellphone apps for amateur stargazers. Download Cosmos Navigator (free), Sky guide (R25) or Star Walk (R37) from your app store and prepare to be amazed.