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### ***Route de la Belle Etoile - Route of the Beautiful Star***

*A documentary photobook about pro-am in astronomy.*

It was early 2019 when I chanced upon a news article, its detail now long forgotten. Still, the feature, championing the work of an amateur astronomer, left a lasting impression. What followed were four years of intense research punctuated by a pandemic, with many a self-funded journey to photograph amateur astronomers, who in some way contribute to professional research.

I am no astronomer, it must be said. But my interest runs deep – and has sustained since I was a boy, when my grandfather would hoist me atop his shoulders, point upwards and name the constellations. In my encounters with these amateur astronomers, I felt a degree of kinship, our lives intertwined by a zeal for the stars, not to mention the frequency with which Star Trek cropped up in conversation.

My forthcoming book *Route de la Belle Etoile* <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/gblimitededitions/route-de-la-belle-etoile-route-of-the-beautiful-star> attempts to reflect the global gossamer thread of amateur scientists, and I did my utmost to reach them, photographing amateurs in the UK, France, Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, India, Australia, and Canada. If I had a bit more money that list would be longer. If I had a lot more money, this project may have never ended.

As the end of 2019 beckoned, (and before the pandemic made 2020-2021 ‘research’ years) the project was well underway, as I found myself driving solo for hours towards the Canadian border from Spokane in the USA. Later that evening, I was perched on Jack Newton’s rooftop home observatory overlooking Osoyoos, with a moon underlit by soft earthshine. We discussed the unlikely possibility of extra-terrestrial visits to Earth with other guests in tow in his eclectic astronomy-themed and wallpapered B&B. Jack’s supernova work is familiar to those in the know - of particular note his efforts in search of the Progenitor of the Type Ib Supernova 20100 in Arp 299, for which he was granted time as an investigator on the Hubble Space Telescope. The B&B sadly closed its doors for good in 2023.

Armed with his 20” Meade RCX400, Jack is a classic example of the lone amateur, remotely partnering with the professionals. From a photographer’s perspective, documenting this kind of intimate yet behind-the-scenes collaboration can be a challenge, so I was keen to find a visual opportunity that would illuminate it more emphatically.

It came in 2021, strolling amongst the domes of L’Observatoire de Haute-Provence, France. I arrived in Provence to the warm embrace of a French summer evening. I was there for five nights to attend the Spectro Star Party, organised annually by instruments manufacturer, Shelyak. I disembarked my taxi to a field littered with telescopes, ghoulishly covered against the harsh sun, sat squat in anticipation of the night. As the light dimmed, amateurs and

professionals worked in unison. Common targets of interest were 10 Lac and Deneb, but observers freely pointed their instruments on targets that took their fancy.

Some collaborations hit sweeter notes; married couple Christian Buil and Valérie Desnoux, sat side by side, night after night, in quiet spectroscopic observation. On its website proclaiming the event, Shelyak promised participants much merriment: *“you may not have time to do everything, because there is also a swimming pool on the site, hiking trails in the scrubland around the site, singing cicadas, some opportunities to take a nap... It will give an excuse to return the following year.”*

When it comes to amateurs collaborating with each other, the so-called “Finnish Pro-am Network” is a self-organised standout. They operate a three-observatory mission spanning the girth of the country, mostly focused on variables. Amateur astronomer Arto Oksanen proved a generous guide for the course of my stay in the country in late 2019.

Trying to maximize the science output of observations, those from the network are, for example monitoring the recurrent nova M31N 2008-12a for nova outburst – taking a deep image every clear night to check if the nova is visible or not.

In tandem with other observers around the globe, they also make observations of other high interest targets like eclipsing cataclysmic variables – combining light curves that can be several days long – something a single professional telescope cannot do.

Two years later though, and roughly six thousand kilometres south-east of Finland - I was in a decidedly moister Pune, India. It was there I met another variable-observing group, members of Jyotirvidya Parisansta which claims to be the oldest such astronomical society in the country. On a nondescript rooftop in Pune, their blue, domed observatory sits as a beacon to amateur science against the disorder of the cityscape.

Using a 12” 1200mm scope, JVP members make variable star observations and submit them to the AAVSO (American Association of Variable Star Observers). They tend to use an 11” 3000mm for planetary imaging and also report asteroid occultation data to the IOTA (International Occultation Timing Association), and on top of that – they coordinate the IOTA-India.

Only a month or so earlier, I was on the other side of the world in Australia, having driven more than eight hours from Melbourne to the frontier home of Trevor Barry in Broken Hill. Trevor’s is a name etched in many a memory – forever associated with Saturn. His custom 408mm F4.5 Newtonian is imprinted with care, attention, and NASA stickers. We sat in his office as Trevor chronicled his recent collaborative efforts observing a cyclone at 50°N in the atmosphere of Saturn – the source of eight separate convective storms. Back in 2018, in a broadcast interview, he had articulated how many a space scientist invariably describe their work: *“what does it make me feel? Insignificant.”*

This is a small excerpt of the stories of the people and places featured in this extensively researched photobook, understood to be the first monograph spotlighting the global

patchwork of amateur astronomers who contribute to professional astronomical research. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/gblimiteditions/route-de-la-belle-etoile-route-of-the-beautiful-star> via Kickstarter (live now) will support the printing of the work by renowned publisher GOST books and help make this book accessible to a wider audience.

Oh, and the title! *Route de la Belle Etoile* (Route of the Beautiful Star) is a road in Grenoble, France. Amateur spectroscopist Olivier Thizy lobbied his local authority successfully for the name change.

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