

WINT: Observing Time Awarded to High School Students from The Netherlands

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As well as extending the borders of our knowledge of the universe, one of the tasks of Astronomy is to communicate these efforts to the public and to encourage the emergence of the next generation of astronomers. The Dutch graduate school “NOVA” recently organised “WINT”, a competition amongst high school students throughout the Netherlands. At stake for the forty or so contestants, from which four winners had to be selected, was a trip to La Palma and share in two nights of observing time with the Wide Field Camera at the 2.5m INT (the name of the project means “winning” in Dutch, as well as being the acronym for “observing time at the INT”).

The proposals were diverse, ranging from popular targets such as planetary nebulae to challenging observations such as the smaller moons of Saturn and minor planets. The main selection criteria were that the proposals should be well researched and that the observing parameters had been checked, as well as that data would be obtained which could be used for exercises in the classroom later.

The winners were Caroline Straatman who was interested in the stellar colours arising from galaxy collisions, Max Verhagen who wanted to obtain images and colours of the stars and nebulosity in the Pleiades, Evelien Dam who wanted to recover the smaller moons of Saturn, and Suyan Zhang who wrote the best case for the Owl Nebula, a popular target. We also allocated secondary programs for each of the school students, to be done if time allowed and, in the case of Evelien’s project, to allow for the evident difficulty of her prime target. The winners were all (near) school leavers of age 16–18. Accompanying them were two students of Astronomy from the University of Groningen, Else Starkenburg and Jakob van Bethlehem, myself, and a science reporter. Prof Peter Barthel and Jacques Visser provided organisation and logistical support in the Netherlands.

The prize included a guided tour of the island, visits to some of the observatory facilities, and observing on February 24 and 25. By chance, the first night coincided with an occultation of a star by a minor planet, the narrow footprint of which passed through the Canary Islands! A webcam was set up to allow the “folks back home” to follow the action and to contribute suggestions via an interactive forum.

The weather on arrival at La Palma was poor, and this hindered the sightseeing trip somewhat, the the extent of the problem only becoming apparent when we were denied access to the mountain for the first night of observing (immediately ruling out the occultation). This type of decision is not taken lightly, as was confirmed the next day when we drove up to the observatory in a convoy of (unusually slow) taxis. We were confronted with scenes of chin-high snow dunes, heavy clearance machines, biting cold winds, and a generally pessimistic feeling about the prospects of observing on this, our second and last night. ING, sensing this also, had started to open the door to partial use of a third night.

In the end, and to everyone’s relief, we did in fact observe throughout the entire second night, despite the imminent danger of the wind forcing the dome to close. Data was obtained for all projects and we were even able to put some preliminary results on the website, which was designed by another student in Groningen, Christiaan Boersma. A victim of our own success, the webcam could not handle the number of hits and failed at the moment supreme, but we continued to receive messages of support and excitement from home base. The data is bound to keep a large number of Dutch school children busy in the coming weeks.

After a few hours sleep in the Residencia we learned that the weather had again taken a turn for the worse and were further impressed when we spotted what appeared to be a royal decree referring to the danger of high winds. Due to fly back to the Netherlands early the next day, we decided that risk of becoming stuck on the mountain was too much to ignore, despite the enticement of further observing. Thus, we returned to sea level by way of a two-and-a-half hour taxi ride in poor conditions, only to hear rumours that many flights from La Palma had been cancelled. I will spare the account of chaos at the overstretched airport at La Palma, but in the end we arrived back in Amsterdam nearly two days later than planned. The first newspaper articles had begun appearing, and the WINT project, we learned, would feature the coming weekend in a national newspaper, as well as in a radio program to be compiled from audio material gathered by the reporter who had accompanied us on the trip.

Despite the weather-related setbacks and delays, our little group continued throughout to bask in the satisfaction of having visited the observatory and having used the powerful Isaac Newton Telescope for a whole night, under circumstances which came very close to us not even being able to leave sea level during the entire trip. We enjoyed each other’s company, and I was moved by the first new message to appear on the website following our return, written by Max, one of the participants: “I miss La Palma already...” Truly, we did our share to guarantee the emergence of the next generation of astronomers! □



Students at the INT control room during WINT observations.