



Dr Chris Riley will get the 'Star Party' started at La Palma in the Canary Islands

Sky-watchers get the star treatment

Amateur astronomers can direct some of the world's largest telescopes when the OU runs Britain's biggest ever sky-watching mass participation event later this month.

BBC2's *All Night Star Party* is also set to feature the best ever television pictures of Mars, link up with the Red Planet-bound Beagle 2, zoom in on distant galaxies and exploded stars, listen for evidence of extra-terrestrial life and discover a new asteroid – all live on TV and the internet.

But the biggest thrill for many viewers will be the chance to control two of the world's largest lenses – the Lovell Radio telescope at Jodrell Bank and the Isaac Newton at La Palma in the Canary Islands.

"It promises to be a fantastic event," says Pete Brown, who will produce the OU-funded show when it goes out on BBC2 on August 23. "We're expecting to see spectacular gas clouds, galaxies exploding – we may even spot an approaching comet."

BBC news presenter Sophie Raworth will host the main party with Rajesh Mirchandani at Jodrell Bank, while Dr Chris Riley heads the link-up broadcast in La Palma. They will be joined by experts including Beagle 2 team leader Professor Colin Pillinger and OU astronomers Professor Barrie Jones and Dr Carole Haswell, as well as 200 amateur enthusiasts chosen from hundreds already emailing to suggest where to point the telescopes.

"Perhaps someone's had a star named after them, or they're fascinated by a particular part of the universe – no one but the professionals ever gets a chance to guide these telescopes, so it's a real opportunity for amateur astronomers," says Brown.

The event starts with a 90-minute live TV broadcast at 11.20pm – "we did need to explain patiently to a couple of people why we couldn't broadcast it at 7pm, when we'd get more viewers" – and continues online

through the night. "The thing about space is that you're not just looking millions of miles into the distance, you're looking millions of years into the past," Brown says. "When you focus a telescope on Andromeda, for instance, the length of time it takes the light to travel from there to here means the picture you're seeing is from two million years ago. It's awe-inspiring."

The night's events will include a healthcheck to ensure Beagle 2 is on course and schedule for its Christmas landing on Mars, and a chance to listen for extra-terrestrial life. The Lovell Radio telescope is, according to the programme notes, equipped to detect a mobile phone 220 million miles away, but as it's unlikely any aliens will answer the call (it is the middle of the night, after all), viewers will instead join experts in listening for clues of regular radio waves transmission.

"We're looking for intelligent life – with emphasis on intelligent," says Brown. "You can pick up sounds in space anyway, but we'll be listening for radio waves in patterns which suggest a deliberate signal."

He adds that one of the programme's biggest attractions is uniting amateur and professional astronomers. "For amateurs it's about seeing things in space which turn them on," he says. "For professionals it's about understanding the process."

"We'll be involving both groups. The whole thing will be like a giant physics lab in the sky," he adds. "Space is so complicated, yet so wondrous. If you've had a bad day, you just look up into the sky and realise how tiny a part of it we are, and our problems really don't matter in that vast space."

PETER TAYLOR-WHIFFEN

Anyone keen to direct the telescopes can e-mail starparty@bbc.co.uk. The OU has a range of astronomy courses – call 01908 653231 or visit www3.open.ac.uk/courses/subjects and click on astronomy and planetary sciences

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