



Hope for the world

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The Mountains Of La Palma

A surprise awaits you at the top of the highest mountain on the island of La Palma – the small and most northwesterly of the Canary Islands, situated in the Atlantic Ocean off the African coast west of Morocco.

Unlike most of the other Canary Islands – like Tenerife or Lanzarote – La Palma’s main industry is agriculture, rather than tourism. It’s a beautiful and mountainous island, with the highest peak rising to over 2,400 metres, or 8,000 feet.

The surprise at the island’s summit is an astronomical observatory area, with about 15 separate telescopes, housed in various large buildings scattered around the top of the mountain.

Each one can cost upwards of £100 million, and they’re used to study the sun, the stars, comets and galaxies out in distant space. They include the world’s largest single-aperture optical telescope, at 10.4 metres, and another one which provides the highest resolution solar imaging of any telescope in the world.

But why has this small island in the Atlantic Ocean been selected as the location for all these telescopes? Well, what the astronomers were looking for was a place with clear, dark skies. And there are three features which make La Palma and its highest mountain fit the bill. It’s cloud-free for around 350 days of the year, there’s minimal industrial contamination or smog in the air, and there’s negligible artificial light pollution, too.

Now the cloud-free skies are a natural phenomenon, but the absence of light and lack of particles in the air are human features. The island government agreed to constrain urban and industrial development, and to curtail outdoor lighting, so that natural conditions are retained.

The people of La Palma have accepted that to keep the atmosphere suitable for telescopes, there have to be some constraints on their activities. And the result is spectacular astronomical science.

There won’t be much direct affect on those telescopes from climate change. But at the UN climate talks in Paris this month, we need countries around the world to embrace some limitations on their use of fossil fuels, so that the atmosphere – on which we and all the rest of the natural world depend – is kept suitable for life.

La Palma has managed to flourish within constraints, protecting its atmosphere from the pollution of particles and light. That’s a sign of hope, that we in the rest of the world can manage to flourish with less and less coal, oil and gas – and deforestation – to protect our atmosphere from over-heating.

The summit of La Palma is a special place – not only for astronomers, but as a symbol and example of how we can protect the atmosphere if we’re determined enough to do so. Controlling our effect on the climate is possible. Let’s pray that in Paris and beyond we find ways to make it a reality.



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