

President's Message



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Dear Fellow Planetarians:

I hope that 2010 has started well for all of you, and hope that your plots and plans flourish.

The countdown to the IPS conference in Egypt has now started. By the time you read this, all of the details should be posted on the IPS website as well as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina web pages.

If you are wondering whether you should go or not, I can provide some local colour for you. The city is on the shores of the Mediterranean and is separated from the sea by the Corniche, a multi-lane road which hugs the coast. The city was founded by Alexander the Great and was named after him so it has a long history.

The Nile: Bigger than Alexander

In fact, the history of the Nile River and the delta is even more venerable than Alexander, as it is one of the places where humans first settled along a reliable water course and started to farm their food. The river provided abundant fish and other wildlife for food, and their grain crops were nurtured in the dark-coloured silt that was brought down by the reliable seasonal floods from the Ethiopian Highlands. All of this is documented in the wonderful carvings of everyday life in the temples and tombs of the Pharaohs and their people.

The society which emerged along the Nile valley was very hierarchical. The old suppositions that the pyramids and other grand architecture were built by slaves has now been revised with the discovery of the towns where the construction crews lived, adjacent to the massive buildings.

The conference has two excursions planned at the end of the event, one to see Cairo and the pyramids at Giza and the other to the south to Luxor to see the temples of the upper Nile. During the conference there will be a chance to see the well-preserved artifacts in the city, including one of the world's first universities.

The city is huge and sprawling. The easiest

way in is by air, but I have also travelled from Cairo to Alexandria by taxi. It is a long journey across the flat delta of the Nile, so an air conditioner will be an essential fitting in the vehicle. I would not recommend driving as the local driving customs are most kindly described as startling, so I would say that local traffic knowledge is crucial.

The venue for the conference is the new Library of Alexandria, rebuilt on the Corniche and named as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. From the plaza in front of the space-age library building, you can look across to the harbour to the ancient fort and the site where the Pharos Lighthouse once stood as one of the Wonders of the Ancient World.

Alexandria has that characteristic bustle of a great trading city. The traffic is constant, heavy, and noisy. You will know that you are on the African continent. The cafes and coffee bars bordering the Corniche serve sweet espresso coffees, pastries and hookah water pipes and it is very pleasant to join the locals at sundown and sit outside to watch the passing show.

Confessing an Obsession

I think that it is time for a confession: my obsession with gadgets and new technology is all consuming. Mea culpa. I am actually a hi-tech gadget freak. I just adore gadgets that do precisely what they say on the box.

My current favourite is my iPhone. It just works so well, and almost set itself up. Its only failing is a regrettable fragility, discovered when my cat Felix decided to play with it and boxed it on to the tiled floor with a swift left paw. The touch screen did not survive.

It was probably all my fault as I had been demonstrating the Koi Pond application to him a little while earlier, and he was mightily impressed by the e-fish swimming in the e-water and the splashy e-noises when he touched them with his paw. I am sure that he was trying to catch one. It was easy to fix the broken screen, and Felix's allowance has been cut for the next year.

I assume that many of you, like me, still

have the mental scars of earlier encounters with "easy to set up" wireless routers which were anything but easy. My wireless devices are almost all Apples now and they work brilliantly.

I have also just broken one of the first rules of guys and gadgets by buying and reading a manual for Mac OS X Snow Leopard. It's amazing the stuff those programmes actually can do when you read the manual!

I am actually dreading seeing the latest jewel in the Apple empire's crown. It looks like as soon as I lay my hands on an iPad it will be sold, and I will be facing a life of outsize pockets as it looks a mite bigger than my standard pants and shirt pockets. Will we see special iPad vests? You read it here first.

But They Can't Beat ...

I have to say that my all-time favourite astronomy gadget is the Hubble Space Telescope. I remember reading about what it was going to be capable of before its launch in 1990. I also recall the huge disappointment when the first blurry images came back and the optical fault was identified. I thought that NASA had blown it.

However, my gadget faith was renewed in spades when the December 1993 servicing mission flew to repair the Hubble's short sight. As I am very short-sighted I was hugely sympathetic; I still can remember my astonishment at the details revealed by my new specs when I was 10.

The results that the Hubble Team released following the optical corrections were just mind blowing. I had grown up in the era of black and white and the Voyager flyby solar system missions that yielded amazing detail and colour, but the HST's new abilities surpassed all that had gone before.

Now 19 years old and counting, Hubble's popularity was reinforced when the decision to allow it to die was rescinded and it was given a further lease of life with the final May 2009 servicing mission. I don't know how you feel, but in my opinion I think that the joint NASA-ESA Hubble image releases have done more than almost anything I can think of to popularise our subject. Who is not awed by the spectacular M16 Eagle Nebula images capturing the birth pangs of juvenile stars, or by the explosive remnants of Eta Carina?

For me, the most impressive HST image is the Hubble Ultra Deep Field with its population of 10,000 galaxies, each containing billions of stars. The most mind expanding part of it is explaining to our young visitors that this image is just a teeny bit of the heavenly sphere. It gives a perspective to us humans, and allows us to appreciate the immensity of the cosmos and the need for us to keep looking for all of the other hidden secrets that remain to be discovered. ☆