your weekly guide to recreation and relaxation

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Observer: Stargazer Alastair Brickell at his observatory on the northern side of Kuaotunu Hill, near Whitianga, Coromandel. Photos: PETER DRURY

Stars in your eyes

Shenagh Gleeson visits a lifelong stargazer's Kuaotunu B&B for an out-of-this-world experience.

The bad stuff about TV is well-documented. It dulls your brain, makes you eat, drink and buy things you shouldn't and gives violence an unreal allure.

But here's something really terrible. It keeps you inside at night.

At night you should be out looking at the stars, that staggeringly beautiful, wonderfully mysterious dome of glittering pinpoints that wraps around our world like a diamond shawl.

One night in December we turned off the TV, gave up the couch and stepped outside the warm, artificially lit comfort of our home.

Stargazer Alastair Brickell had called to say the night was clear and it would be a good time for a visit.

Alastair and his wife Harriette are setting up the Stargazer B&B and Coromandel Observatory on the northern side of the Kuaotunu Hill, north of Whitianga.

A geologist by trade, Alastair has been fascinated by astronomy since he was a boy growing up in Canada.

He keenly followed the space race between the US and USSR and saw the Apollo 14 launch at Cape Canaveral in 1971.

He bought his first telescope for $50 in Australia while in his early 20s and continued pursuing his passion for the stars when he and Harriette moved to Kuaotunu about 30 years ago.

In those days astronomy had to be fitted in around his work as a geologist around the world, and helping Harriette raise two boys and an orchard of macadamia trees in Kuaotunu. Now he has retired and the couple have built a stunning new house that more or less revolves around astronomy. There is a large study dominated by an old planetarium, a twin telescope and all sorts of astronomy-related objects and information.

Outside is an observatory equipped with a 35.5 cm (14-inch) research-grade telescope.

The B&B operation starts in March this year, though the observatory and guided tours of the night sky are already under way.

The night we visit is sharp and clear but it is December, so the night is a long time coming.

By about 9.30pm the bush-clad hills are turning to silhouettes and the stars are emerging. The Moon has already set and the ruru are calling loudly.

Out on the deck by the observatory we first look through giant binoculars at Jupiter, hanging low in the southwestern sky.

It shimmers with an iridescent glow, which Alastair explains is caused by heat rising off the hills. Four of its 63 moons are visible, strung out like little beads in a line.

Then it is on to the familiar constellation of Orion, Canis Major (big

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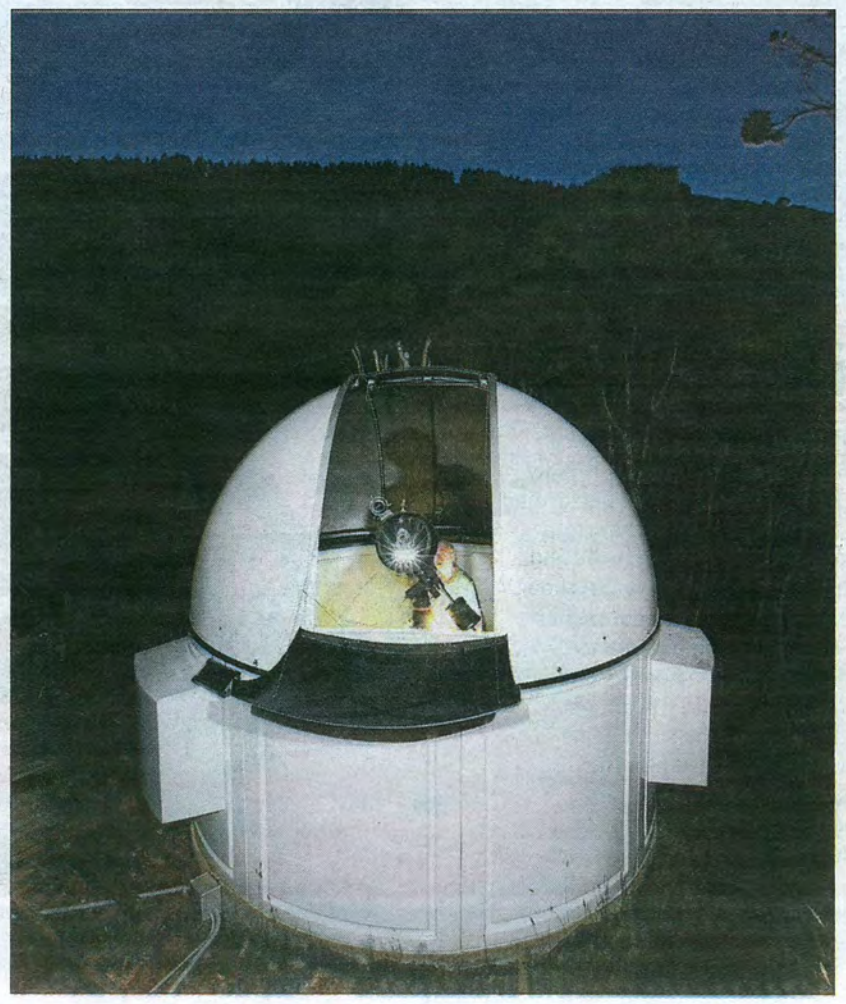
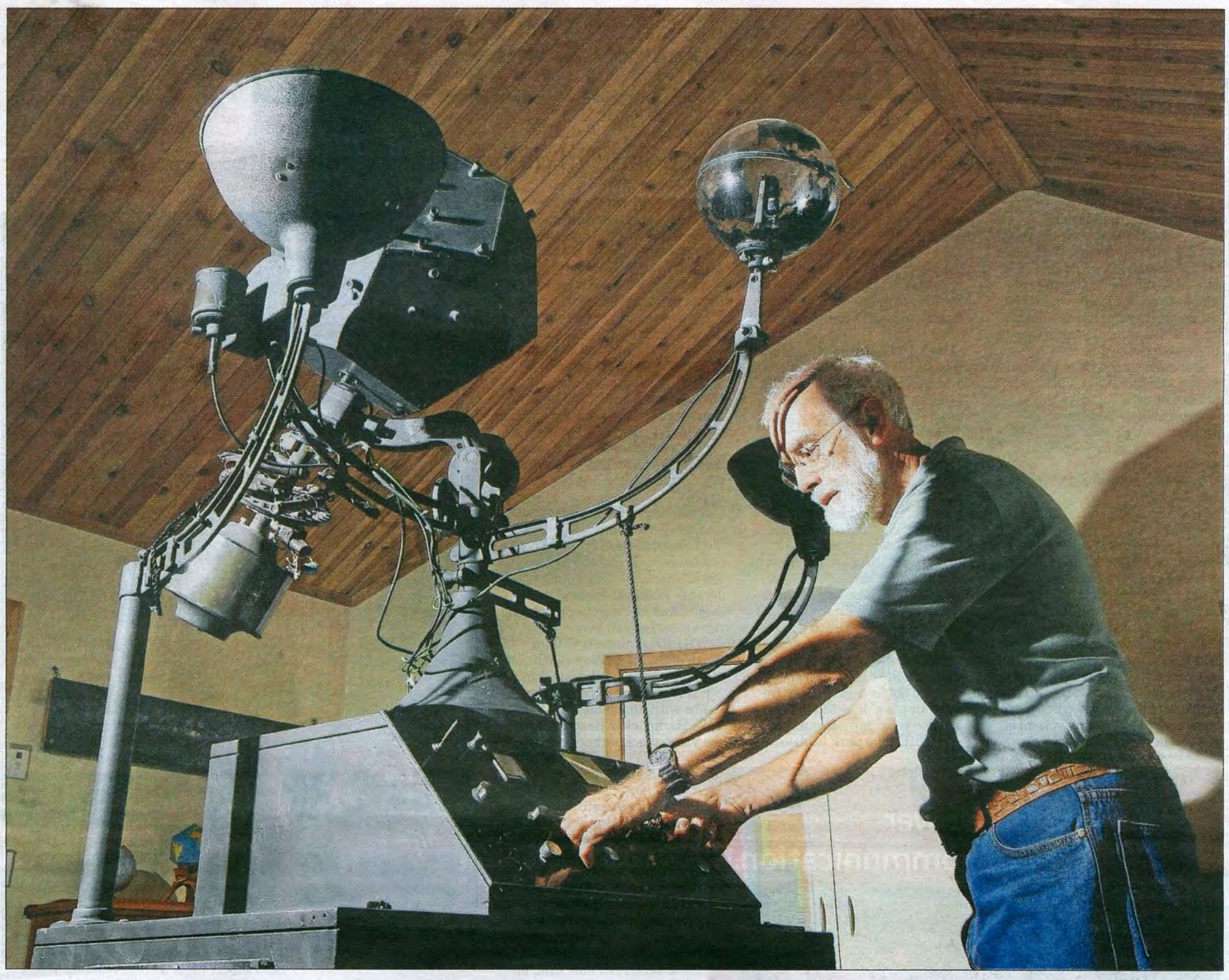


Night watch: Alastair Brickell makes ready for a night's viewing inside the observatory dome at Kuaotunu.



Star tracker: Alastair Brickell with his Spitz planetarium in his Kuaotunu observatory. Photo: PETER DRURY

Heavenly experience

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dog) and Sirius, the brightest star in the sky, a mere eight light years away. Canopus, the second brightest star is a mind-blowing 300 light years away.

Alastair supplies a steady stream of facts and figures but they're delivered with such enthusiasm – and a dose of wry humour – that even an ignoramus like myself can follow most of it.

He alerts us to the likely appearance of the International Space Station and suddenly we pick it up and watch it zoom across the eastern sky, travelling 160 kilometres (100 miles) high at an astonishing speed of 8km a second.

The night is cooling down quickly and we troop inside for a welcome cuppa. Harriette is a friendly and gracious co-host and the house is strikingly original. The high, sloped ceilings are made from Japanese cedar sarking and the floors from Sydney blue gum, both timbers milled from the couple's property. Floor and wall tiles are from Iran, where Alastair worked recently.

Alastair calls us back outside to catch something unusual. Satellite flare is a phenomenon caused by the reflective surfaces on telephone satellites reflecting sunlight directly on to the Earth below and appearing as a brief, bright flash.

He knows when one is likely to occur but it happens in a blink and can easily be missed.

Somehow we are looking in the right place at the right time and see a flash so quick the brain barely has time to register it.

By now the sky is filled to bursting with stars, or should I say galaxies, planets, constellations, nebula and star clusters.

We step into the high-tech observatory, with its formidable telescope. Alastair feeds information into this American-made marvel and it whirrs into action, locating the large and small Magellanic Clouds, which are satellite galaxies to our Milky Way.

Things get totally mind-boggling as we look at them and other celestial bodies up to 10 million light years away. We contemplate the idea of looking at things that may no longer exist and speculate on the likelihood of life beyond Earth.

Much of this is beyond my comprehension but one of Alastair's observations strikes a chord. Human beings have a direct link with the stars, he says. The elements in the Earth and us are the same as the elements in other celestial bodies. Because of the way the universe developed, with stars growing and exploding, every atom in our bodies has been through a star at least three times. Isn't that magic?

Alastair is patient and wonderfully clear in his explanations. His desire to share his love for astronomy is palpable.

It is nearly midnight and the stargazing and talk could go on all night but it is very cold and there is work next day.

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We take a last look at the exquisite Pleiades (Matariki or Seven Sisters) and head back inside.

There is just time for a brief look at the study and some of its treasures.

A strange-looking object in the centre of the room, like something out of a 1950s science fiction movie, turns out to be a Sptiz planetarium.

It does indeed date from the 1950s. It was made by an American company founded by Professor Armand N. Spitz, director of education at the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia, and was owned by the Auckland Museum.

When the museum no longer wanted it, Alastair and the Coromandel Astronomy Group were instrumental in getting it donated to the Mercury Bay Museum in Whitianga. Eventually, however, the museum decided they could not accommodate it and now it has found a home in Kuaotunu.

Coincidentally, the man who installed the machine in the Auckland Museum, Mike Beckingham, now lives in Whitianga. He has partially restored it and, when some new parts arrive from the US, Alastair plans to have showings. It will come in handy in the daytime for school groups and when it is cloudy.

Alastair's piece de resistance is an Argentinian meteorite he bought in Canada which contains particles of space dust from the time of the formation of the Sun.

We finally tear ourselves away and head home, our heads and hearts filled with stars.