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Title: Astronomical observation, a sport, a hobby, or an entire heritage?

Have you ever heard of astronomical tourism? Or ever thought about the possibility of harvesting on a full moon? The Fundamentals of Astronomical Observations course at Ithra Academy sparked students' curiosity; it opened doors to exploration, adventure, and much more. Our instructor, Eng. Ahmed Taher Althaher is a Mechanical Engineer who gained experiences in a mixture of fields from robotics to military industries. Most of all, experience in astronomical observation methods and light pollution assessment. This makes him one of the most passionate and experienced in sharing joyful astronomical lectures. The course was structured to have a two-day classroom lecture followed by a camp visit to Judah Desert for a live demonstration. As a geoscientist, who spent the most memorable learning hours outdoors, I got curious to see how an unfamiliar topic could be taught in a familiar environment.

Stargazing with Ithra Academy

Signing up for the course, I imagined memorizing the names of stars & planets and identifying their locations as a skilled astrophysicist would. To my surprise, none of my expectations were met! Astronomical observation touches on almost every aspect of life, as explained by Eng. Ahmed. As we were going through the lecture slides, the instructor had continuously paused to connect astronomy to the crowd's diverse backgrounds, engraving in our minds that astronomy is integrated in our lives.

We are looking at a universal frame that people for thousands of years have looked at and utilized for navigation, poetry, and scheduling daily tasks. During the lecture, Eng. Ahmed talked about the impact of astronomy on civilizations. For example, in ancient Egypt, the Egyptians were heavily dependent on the bounties of the Nile River. Because of that, they found a correlation between tracking the river's conditions and flooding cycles with the moon and the reappearance of Sothis the star— in today's language, the correlation they have established is now referred to as our modern-day calendar.

Trip to Judah Dessert

Like many of those around me, I have spent most of my life living in cities, where the view of the clear night sky was not an everyday scene. While the magnificent city structure has brought life to the nighttime, it dimmed the lights of the night sky. Too much light at night reduces the clarity of observing stars with the naked eye; reaching a point where they become invisible. Such experience is caused by excessive artificial light, commonly referred to as light pollution. In class, we learned about this type of pollution that accompanies urbanization, but it is not bound by the city limits. Unfortunately, it exceeds it by kilometers, wiping out the pleasure of witnessing a rich and sparkly night sky.

Kingdom's efforts to preserve astronomical observation sights

Suppose one desire to see such a clear night sky. In that case, one must plan to visit rural geographical areas, bearing in mind the distance away from the city, weather conditions, and if any astronomical events are happening during the visit. Thankfully, there are many efforts in the Kingdom to preserve specific locations and protect them from light pollution by marking them as astronomical observation sites only. Eng. Ahmed and many astronomical observation enthusiasts are raising awareness about light pollution and how it jeopardizes astronomical tourism to obsolete.

Know more about stargazing!

I encourage the reader to connect back to childhood curiosity and view the magnitude of countless stars and astronomical events that can be seen with the naked eye. I am filled with gratitude every time I look back to the moment I signed up for the course, and I am thankful to Ithra Academy for hosting it. Nothing tops a learning experience where the classroom is the

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desert, and the blackboard is the sky embroidered with stars. Eng. Ahmed, our instructor, keeps up to date with stargazing tips and trips on Instagram– follow @Judai_Stargazing to know more.

Image from the trip taken by iPhone 11; courtesy of Ahmed Al-Dulaijan, a course participant

