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Saturn visible by computer, telescope and naked eye

Sunday, January 30, 2005
BY DAVID L. DeBruyn

SPECIAL TO THE PRESS

For an eye-popping experience, direct your Internet browser to the "Planetary Photojournal" section of the NASA Web site, and click on the image of Saturn.

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Then check out the latest flood of images from the Cassini-Huygens spacecraft.

The stream of information coming back from instrument probes now exploring Saturn and its vicinity is amazing.

Digital eyes have scrutinized swirling disturbances in the planet's gaseous atmosphere, defined the complex grooved ring system as never before, and provided new details about the icy surfaces of several of Saturn's intriguing satellites.

The highlight of this extended scrutiny came recently when an instrument-carrying disk called Huygens detached from the Cassini orbiter and plunged

into the atmosphere of Saturn's largest moon, Titan.

Scientists have been curious about what is under the obscuring layer around the moon. Titan is second to Jupiter's Ganymede among the largest satellite bodies in the Solar System and is the only one with a significant atmosphere.

With a braking parachute to slow its descent, Huygens made it to the surface, all the while snapping revealing and sometimes puzzling pictures for scientists to ponder.

The probe is named after the Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens, who in 1655 spotted Titan while examining Saturn through a primitive astronomical telescope.

The orbiter is named after Huygen's contemporary, the Italian Gian Domenico Cassini, who discovered additional Saturnian moons and also the conspicuous gap in the planet's ring structure, which today is known as "Cassini's Division." Cassini is credited with correctly interpreting the nature of the rings: a swarm of small icy moonlets orbiting the planet in a narrow plane.

Cassini-Huygens was launched onto a long circuitous route to Saturn in 1997, using multiple gravity assists from Venus, Jupiter and even Earth to get it to its destination. It finally slipped into orbit around Saturn last July, and has been delivering to earth stunning images ever since.

While the lifetime of Huygens is expected to be brief in the hostile environment of Titan, Cassini could be sending back useful information for several years yet while making multiple passes around Saturn and a number of its satellites.

Among the most ambitious space science missions ever, Cassini-Huygens is a joint project of NASA and the European Space Agency. Expect many more revelations about the ringed planet and its neighborhood during coming weeks.

With a small telescope you can see the same features on Saturn the astronomers Cassini and Huygens discovered more than 350 years ago.

Saturn is now high overhead as darkness falls, the only planet now visible in our evening sky.

Here is a quick trick for locating it over the next few weeks. Look straight up around 8 p.m., where you will find the bright star Capella, shimmering with a yellowish glow.

Then look a little east of Capella, where your gaze will come to three bright objects that look like stars. The two that are closest together are stars, Castor and Pollux, the so-called "twin stars" of the constellation Gemini. Just a bit to the southeast is Saturn, given away by a decidedly yellowish glow, similar to Capella.

You can easily resolve Saturn's disk, and also the rings through a telescope magnifying only 50 or 60 times, provided it has good optics and is firmly mounted. Beware of using high powered telescopes when looking at Saturn or anything else in the sky.

The larger image is harder to locate and keep centered in the field of view. It is also more subject to blurring from moving currents of air in the earth's atmosphere.

The rings are now opened wide to our line of sight, making for an impressive telescopic image. Titan is easy in a small telescope, floating in the black background not far from Saturn's disk, and larger telescopes will show up to four fainter Saturnian satellites.

On a night when the earth's atmosphere is really steady, and Saturn's image is crisp and well focused, Cassini's Division (that dark gap in the rings) may even pop into view.

- David L. DeBruyn is curator emeritus of the Roger B. Chaffee Planetarium at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids.

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