

Our Sky in May 2011

Apart from Saturn, which is now well up in the southern sky after dark, there are no other planets to see; however, keep looking to the north after sunset, and you might see noctilucent clouds shining 50 miles up, still lit by the Sun as it skirts below the northern horizon during the summer months.

Last month, we went to press before we knew that Mercury Messenger had gone safely into orbit round that planet; it has and is sending back superb images of that planet.

This month, we travel out from Mercury to Venus, sometimes called the evil twin of Earth. As it shines in the morning and evening sky as the "Morning" or "Evening" star. Something so incomparably beautiful hardly deserves such a harsh description; however, although Venus is only slightly smaller than Earth, and it has an atmosphere which creates the brilliant clouds that reflect the Sun's rays, comparison with Earth ends right there. Before the days of space probes, some astronomers thought that Venus might be rather like a primitive Earth, with oceans and tropical forests; nothing could be further from the truth. The temperature at the surface of Venus is about 480°C, and the atmospheric pressure is 90 times that of Earth. The Carbon Dioxide atmosphere has led to a runaway greenhouse effect, and volcanoes- possibly still active- spew sulphur dioxide into the air which forms sulphuric acid clouds and rain. So if you fancy a tropical holiday on the surface of Venus, expect to be melted, squashed flat and dissolved in acid!

Because of the permanent cloud cover, little was known about the surface of Venus until the spacecraft Magellan, carrying radar, went into orbit in 1990. It sent back superb images of a planet covered in volcanic material and, together with information returned by Russian robot landers, and Earth-based radar telescopes, we now have a pretty good idea of the conditions on that planet; however, there are still some mysteries to be solved as with most astronomical objects, which is what makes it such a fascinating subject to follow.

Next month, we will skip Earth, and talk about the Moon.

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