

Our Night Sky in February 2016

Jupiter becomes a prominent object in the evening, rising in the East at about 8pm, and due south about 3am. All the other planets are too close to the Sun to be visible.

2015 has been a memorable year from the Astronomical point of view, with highlights of a brilliant total eclipse of the Moon, the huge successes of Rosetta at Comet 67P, and the incredible achievement of the New Horizons probe taking breathtaking images of Pluto as it sped past at 30,000 mph. What will 2016 bring? Well, Rosetta will continue to monitor the comet as it hurtles back into the distant reaches of the Solar System from where it came, and will observe the decline of its icy outbursts as it leaves the heat of the Sun. As for New Horizons, NASA's spacecraft will mark New Year's some 125 million miles beyond Pluto, far removed from the excitement and activity that accompanied its historic flight through the Pluto system just five months ago.

The probe continues to send volumes of pictures and other data from the July 14 encounter – stored on its digital recorders – over a radio link to Earth stretching billions of miles. So while 2015 may be over, we're not done on New Horizons. NASA will be receiving new data every week until at least October 2016, and as a result the exploration of the Pluto system continues even as it flies farther into the Kuiper Belt! On Nov. 4, the New Horizons team completed the last of four targeting manoeuvres that set the spacecraft on course for a Jan. 1, 2019 encounter with 2014 MU69. This ancient body in the Kuiper Belt is more than a billion miles beyond Pluto; New Horizons will explore it if NASA approves an extended mission. The science team hopes to explore even closer to MU69 than New Horizons came to Pluto on July 14, which was approximately 7,750 miles. The team will submit its proposal for an extended mission in April. So keep your fingers crossed for 3 years time and, if the Pluto flypast was anything to go by, we should be in for some amazing images.

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