

Celebrating Fifty Years of ESO in Chile

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The fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the agreement between the Government of Chile and ESO to set up a new observatory occurred on 6 November 2013. The anniversary was marked by a formal occasion in Santiago, more informal celebrations at all the ESO sites in Chile and by visits from two European astronauts. A round-up of the anniversary events is presented.

The 6th of November 2013 marked the 50th anniversary of the signing of the initial agreement between the Government of Chile and the European Southern Observatory (ESO), which enabled ESO to site its astronomical observatory in northern Chile beneath its exceptionally clear skies. This was a significant milestone in the scientific, technical and cultural cooperation between Chile and Europe, and the beginning of an international success story that started very shortly after the establishment of ESO itself.

It is remarkable that this celebration happened just one year after the one held in Germany in October 2012, which marked the 50 years since the signature of the ESO convention on 5 October 1962 (see *The Messenger* 150 and Sirey [2012]). The process by which ESO came into existence, with the goal of achieving together that which individual countries could not achieve separately, took more than ten years from conception to reality, and was set against the difficult backdrop of post-war Europe (see Blaauw, 1991). Taking into account the long preparation time, and the fact that when ESO was established it was still undecided where its telescopes were to be located (South Africa was the primary candidate at the time; Blaauw [1991]), the speed with which the decision was made to go to Chile is striking. Intense site-testing activity of the deserts in northern Chile, carried out by both North American and European astronomers in the earlier 1960s, resulted in the establishment of



Figure 1. Many staff and their families attended the 50th anniversary celebration event at the ESO premises in Vitacura in Santiago.



Figure 2. Both present and former staff celebrated the 50th anniversary during the event at Vitacura. From left to right: Erich Schumann, Jean-Michel Bonneau at back, Domingo Durán, Albert Triat, Rolando Medina, Albert Bosker at back, Wolfgang Eckert, Daniel Hofstadt and his wife Sonia Hofstadt, the current ESO Director General Tim de Zeeuw, Óscar Orrego and Jorge Moreno.

fully fledged observatories by ESO, by the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA) on behalf of the US National Science Foundation and by the Carnegie Institution of Washington. This was the beginning of an endeavour that has resulted in the association of Chile with some of the best and most productive telescopes. The list continues with the current world-leading facilities, among which the Very Large Telescope and the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) are foremost (Madsen, 2012).

The signature of the agreement between ESO and the Government of Chile was a recognition of the combination of the unique conditions that nature provides in the northern part of the country with a political appreciation that these conditions offer outstanding advantages for the country, but also yield obligations — on

behalf of humanity — to enable scientific research that can only be conducted efficiently from a limited number of geographical locations. The recognition of these aspects by the Chilean government 50 years ago was far-sighted in every sense of the word. It is equally important that this vision has permeated all other levels of the administration, including the collaboration with the regional and local governments. What began in 1963 has evolved into a remarkable success story and a long-term relationship.

Development of ESO in Chile

In 1969, the observatory at La Silla was inaugurated. In 1976, the 3.6-metre telescope, the largest of the telescopes there, saw first light. La Silla grew over the years, but in 1990, ESO decided to place its next-generation flagship facil-



Figure 3. The 50th anniversary party at Paranal was held on 26 November 2013.

and the upper image on p. 47). On this special occasion ESO was honoured by the presence of the many former employees invited to participate in the event, who could meet long-time colleagues and friends, and shared memories that often went back over many decades of history of ESO (see Figure 2). A series of activities, carefully arranged by a dedicated organising committee, included an open-air exhibition of retrospective material composed of both observatory hardware and pictures, the projection of movies depicting some of ESO's activities, and astronomy-related hands-on activities for the youngest family members. Site celebrations of the 50 years of ESO in Chile took place also at the La Silla and Paranal Observatory sites on 29 and 26 November 2013 respectively (e.g., Figure 3), with the presence of some local and regional authorities.



Figure 4. Alfonso Silva Navarro, the State Secretary of Foreign Affairs (centre), Xavier Barcons, the President of the ESO Council (left) and Tim de Zeeuw, the ESO Director General (right) pictured at the reception held at the Club de La Unión de Santiago, formally celebrating 50 years of ESO's collaboration with Chile.

The 50th anniversary celebrations culminated in a formal ceremony on 8 November 2013 at the imposing Club de la Unión in Santiago, with the attendance of the President of the ESO Council Xavier Barcons, the Director General of ESO and many members of the ESO Finance Committee and senior management. The President of the Republic of Chile was represented by the Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Alfonso Silva Navarro (Figure 4), who was accompanied by other government authorities. Senior representatives from Chilean academia and leading figures of the Chilean astronomical community attended the celebration, as well as the ambassadors of several ESO Member States. Speeches by the ESO Director General, the Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs and the President of the ESO Council highlighted the significance and rich outcome of these 50 years of cooperation between ESO and Chile and the promise for the future. The history of Chilean astronomy from its pioneering beginnings onwards was reviewed by the renowned Chilean astronomer José Maza. Finally, Óscar González, a young Chilean astronomer who was an ESO student in Garching and is now an ESO Fellow in Chile, offered some perspectives on his career as an example of how the cooperation between ESO and Chile has benefitted generations of astronomers.

ity, the Very Large Telescope, on Cerro Paranal. In the wake of this decision, the original agreement between the Government of Chile and ESO was amended, recognising that, in the years that had passed, both Chile and ESO had undergone great changes. The new agreement foresaw much closer and wider cooperation, with ESO actively supporting the development of Chilean astronomy and related technologies and, through its public outreach activities, also supporting efforts to strengthen the awareness and interest of the public at large in science and technology.

Yet, this was only the beginning. Paranal is now recognised as the most advanced optical and near-infrared astronomical observatory in the world. The ALMA radio telescope has been built in a global partnership with the US National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Japanese

National Institutes of Natural Sciences (NINS) and is operational at Chajnantor, taking advantage of the superb conditions that this unique high site offers for millimetre and submillimetre astronomy. Soon, on Cerro Armazones, near to Paranal, construction will start on the 39.2-metre European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT), which will be the largest optical telescope ever built. The E-ELT will ensure that the Paranal Observatory will continue to have a privileged place in astronomy for many decades to come.

Celebrations in Chile

ESO celebrated its first 50 years in Chile with a number of activities. The celebrations started on 30 October 2013 with an open-air party at the ESO offices in Vitacura (Santiago), with the participation of staff and their families (see Figure 1

The ceremony on 8 November 2013 included the gift by ESO to the Government of Chile of the first atomic clock belonging to ESO, which started working at the La Silla Observatory in 1976. Besides its historical value, this clock also has strong symbolic resonance with the cooperation between ESO and Chile, since the official time in Chile was obtained for many years by synchronising with the La Silla atomic clock. This gift was clearly appreciated by the Government of Chile, which arranged for a private ceremony at the Presidential palace on 14 November 2013, where the ESO Director General delivered the clock personally to the President of the Republic of Chile, His Excellency Sebastián Piñera (see Announcement ann13092 for details).

Anniversary visitors and events

The fiftieth anniversary celebrations also presented an opportunity for special guests to visit the observatories. Among these visitors, ESO was honoured by the presence of two ESA astronauts: Pedro Duque, who has orbited the Earth on board both the Space Shuttle and the International Space Station (see lower image on the Astronomical News section page); and Claude Nicollier, an astronomer by training who had observed at La Silla in the early 1970s, before becoming a veteran of five Space Shuttle missions, including two repair expeditions to the Hubble Space Telescope (see Announcement ann13088 and Figure 5). In addition to his visit to Paranal, Pedro Duque participated in a public colloquium on science and art organised by the Cultural Centre of Spain in Santiago de Chile and gave talks on his experiences in space to ESO staff both on Paranal and in Santiago. Claude Nicollier also gave public talks organised by the Swiss embassy in Chile, which hosted his visit, and by the University of Santiago de Chile. By a fortunate coincidence, astronaut Pedro Duque arrived on Paranal almost at the same time that President Piñera was landing at the observatory premises to deliver the decrees of donation of the Cerro Armazones land to ESO, on 27 October 2013 (see Release eso1345), thus allowing the President and the astronaut to meet and warmly greet each other on Paranal.



Figure 5. ESA astronaut and former ESO visiting astronomer Claude Nicollier seen inside a VLT dome during his visit to Paranal on 3–4 December 2013.

In addition to these visits, which were actively supported by the Spanish and the Swiss embassies, other embassies of the ESO Member States also contributed, with a variety of events in Santiago to highlight the significance of the first 50 years of ESO in Chile as a cultural link between Europe and Chile, extending beyond the strict domains of science and technology. Coordinated by the Delegation of the European Union in Chile, activities were organised by the embassies of France, Germany and Italy, as well as by the delegation in Chile of the region of Wallonie-Brussels. The celebrations extended even beyond the current ESO Member States, as the embassies of Greece and Poland also organised astronomy-related events under the umbrella of the 50th anniversary of ESO in Chile.

Towards the next 50 years in Chile

To highlight the history and achievements of these 50 years of collaboration, the brochure *ESO y Chile: Un puente científico y cultural* was produced (in Spanish) and widely distributed in Chile. Its purpose is to promote knowledge about ESO and its activities in the host state among the general public. The brochure briefly describes the current facilities of ESO in Chile, the history of the past 50 years,

the existing collaborations between ESO and Chile and the expectations for the future represented by the E-ELT.

In these past 50 years, Chile has become the world centre for ground-based astronomy. This owes much to the determination of the Government of Chile and all the levels of the Chilean administration to protect the extraordinary but fragile treasure of its clear and dark skies. This achievement is also attributable to its equally determined support of science and technology in the country, to the active promotion of international cooperation and to the public appreciation of the night sky as a part of its cultural heritage. ESO is proud to be associated with such an impressive growth of capabilities and looks forward toward an even closer collaboration in the future, enabling astronomy in its Member States and in Chile to continue growing together in this example of international cooperation at its best.

References

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