

see this huge instrument towering high above my head, and to realize that all those thousands of kilogrammes of steel are necessary only to hold a few grammes of aluminium in the right place, as staff astronomer Hugo Schwartz put it. This telescope is really *big!* People walk around in the Cassegrain cage, and I lost my way in the immense building.

For me, looking at the southern sky with the naked eye (or with my 15 × 80 binoculars) was just as rewarding as looking at the faint stars in ω Cen 'through' the 3.6-m telescope. The Eta Carinae nebula, the clusters and nebulae in Scorpius and Sagittarius, the Magellanic Clouds, the ruddy supernova 1987A and the faint patch of light of Comet Wilson could hold my attention for hours. The serenity and the vastness of the universe, completely indifferent to our activities, put me at rest and made me feel small. Standing there, right at the middle of the world's largest observatory, I could easily imagine that I was the only one present. Sometimes, there was not a single sound to hear, apart from the occasional squeaking of a rotating dome. This, and the soft, red light that shone from some of the slits, reminded me of human presence in all those domes. Isn't it a lonely business, being an observational astronomer?

During a number of nights, I was not a visiting astronomer, but I was visiting astronomers, walking from one telescope building to the next. I came to the conclusion that being lonely is not the biggest problem. It's the *cold*, especially in the smaller domes, where the astronomer is working at the observing floor. ESO's André Muller provided me with an observing jacket, but even then, the wind was so penetrating that working for twelve hours under these severe circumstances looked like madness. At the bigger telescopes, the separate control rooms give some relief, but still, you keep your jacket on, because it's *cold*. In addition, depending on your observing programme, there's the problem of how to spend your time. Giuseppe Galletta of Padua University, who was taking spectra of faint S0-galaxies with the 2.2-m telescope, explained to me that even the sensitive spectrograph needed ninety minutes of photon-collecting in order to produce a decent spectrum. Since the telescope is equipped with an autoguider, there is not much to do in the meantime: Galletta had plenty of time to explain his observing programme to me, while his night assistant was reading a book! And staff astronomer Bo Reipurth, who was using the Danish 1.54-m telescope for a search of pre-main sequence binaries in star-forming regions, seemed to enjoy



Figure 3: In the first week of May, 1987, La Silla was experiencing an unexpected snowstorm. Though unwelcome for astronomers, the snow made for some impressive sights.

my visit as an opportunity to talk about lots of things, from astronomy education to politics.

I really enjoyed my stay at La Silla. First of all, ESO's staff people take very good care of their visitors, and the food (including scores of cakes!) was delicious. But my visit also gave me a new look at observational astronomy. Until now, when I gave a popular lecture for a general audience about astronomy, I used to tell them that nowadays astronomy has lost some of its romance from the past; that computers, remote control, autoguiding and fast electronic detectors were making astronomical observing more or less luxurious, compared to the 'old' situation in which an astronomer's eye-brow could freeze to the telescope during a six hour exposure. But now I came to realize that things are not so easy. Of course, astronomy has changed a lot in the past few decades, but observing the universe is still a challenge. It can make you suffer, but it is rewarding. In this sense, astronomy is still romantic.

However, I can foresee a time in which the romance of observational astronomy really vanishes. When ESO's Very Large Telescope will be erected in the late nineties, perhaps at Paranal, nearly all observing programmes will be carried out by remote control from ESO's headquarters in Germany. This not only means that observers won't see the telescope they are using and that they are partly working during daytime, but they even will not have the possibility to look up and wonder at the beauty of the universe. Contact with the stars will be lost forever.

Like anybody who loves astronomy, I

look forward to the construction and the completion of the VLT. But I hope to stand at the base of this monster instrument one night, watching the huge telescopes swing in unison to a position in which they are pointing at a black and empty part of the celestial void, and imagining how the gigantic mirrors are catching a handful of photons from an unknown galaxy at the edge of space and time.

I'm quite sure that I will revisit ESO one day, because in a sense a visit to ESO is a visit to the cosmos.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Richard West, who arranged my visit to La Silla; to Hans-Emil Schuster for his hospitality; to Hugo Schwartz for showing me around, and to all staff and visiting astronomers for their patience in talking to me and answering my questions.

STAFF MOVEMENTS

Arrivals

Europe:

- BRUNETTO, Enzo (I), Designer-Draughtsman
- PLÖTZ, Franz (D), Electro-Mechanical Engineer

Departures

Chile:

- BOOTH, Roy (GB), Associate
- CRISTIANI, Stefano (I), Astronomer

Europe:

- RODRIGUEZ ESPINOSA, José (E), Fellow
- DEFERT, Philippe (B), Fellow