

ESO Exhibitions in Chile – a Tremendous Success

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1. Introduction

After having travelled over South America, with stop-overs in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires (during the IAU General Assembly), the ESO exhibition was set-up in Santiago, at "Universidad de Chile", where it attracted more than 18,000 visitors during last December. Concurrently and in the same premises, conferences were given by ESO astronomers Olivier Hainaut and Andrea Moneti, and by Chilean astronomers from that university (María Teresa Ruiz, José Maza, Leopoldo Infante) and "Universidad Católica" (Hernán Quintana). The impact of such an undertaking was a surprise for all of us. Although we were concerned that the official "Salón de Honor" of the university would be too large for the expected audience, it could hardly contain the numerous and enthusiastic public who rushed upon this opportunity to learn more about astronomy in general, and ESO (and its VLT project) in particular. A great interest from the public, a great fun for us and the speakers: a really big success.

As a consequence, ESO has been requested by several universities and organizations to set up the exhibition in various other places throughout Chile, and ESO is now considering how best to meet these demands. Next firm rendezvous has been taken in Antofagasta, a very important place for ESO's future.

Besides these larger exhibitions, ESO participated in the fairs of Peñuelas, "FINOR" (Feria Internacional del Norte) and of Ovalle, and these were great

opportunities to meet the public of the 4th Region, which hosts La Silla.

2. The Peñuelas Exhibition

Peñuelas was originally a fishermen village, along the beach between La Serena and Coquimbo. Some fishermen are still active there but no longer the heart of the village, transformed into one of the attractive beach resorts in Chile. Every summer, during the touristic peak, a "FINOR" takes place, a good opportunity to show to people coming from all over Chile and neighbouring countries, what is happening in the North. ESO could not be absent from such an event.

Together with a selected part of the standard exhibition, a 11" Celestron telescope was installed on the site. Indeed, our stand and our telescope turned out to be one of the principal attractions of the fair. The interest of the public was demonstrated by the crowd of people visiting our stand, the numerous questions asked (some very interesting), and the patience of those queueing up to get the chance to glance at Jupiter or the Moon. The enthusiasm of the public rewarded well the efforts ESO put into the event. Also we had a chance to clear the confusion many visitors made between ESO and CTIO. After a few days of exhibition, several broadcasted interviews and a 15-minute documentary presented during the local TV news, this confusion did not occur so often.

Our stand was visited by the Ministers of Agriculture, Mr. Juan Agustín Figueroa, of Mining and Energy, Mr. Juan

Hamilton, all Deputies and Senators for the IVth region, the provincial Governor, the Mayors of La Serena and Coquimbo who showed a genuine interest in learning more about ESO. Mr. Renán Fuentealba, the "Intendente" (highest authority) for the IVth region came several times to our stand, and twice at night with his family to look through our telescope. Most of the ESO local and international staff living in the La Serena area visited us, showing great satisfaction at the initiative taken by the Organization. What may be most important is that a great number of professors and students came and asked all kind of information. The permanence of an astronomer during the fair was therefore a requirement.

A total of about 80,000 people visited the fair, of which more than two thirds actually visited our stand. As for the telescope, we had only one cloudy night, and people queued up from 8:30 p.m. till 2:00 a.m. (and even later during weekends): with a typical *observing time* of 15 seconds each, about 13,000 people "observed" during the whole fair! Our stand was the last to close at night and on Saturdays and Sundays we had to require the help of the "Carabineros" to control the queue, and close the observing runs by 3 a.m.!

As a recognition for this success and our efforts, ESO was one of the 3 stands (among 100) awarded a special distinction during the closing act of the fair. Although this prize is highly symbolic, it clearly shows the impact of the ESO presentation at this event.

Following this great success, ESO



The official opening of the fair. The Minister of Agriculture, Mr. J. Figueroa, with ESO staff P. Bouchet, A. Cabillic and J. Peralta.



General view of the ESO stand with public.



P. Bouchet and J. Peralta (who usually attend the ESO office at the bus terminal station in La Serena) with the "queen" of the fair, Miss Terry-Ann Maxwell.



R. Vega and P. Bouchet with the "1st vice-queen" of the fair at the ESO Celestron telescope.

was requested by the organizers of *Expovalle* to participate in that fair, too.

3. The "Expovalle" Exhibition

Ovalle, a city of 100,000 inhabitants and the capital of the *Limari* province, is located 80 kilometres inland from La Serena. Since 1980, the *Limari* valley has become the regional leader in agriculture. It produces 70 % of the grapes for *Pisco*, it contains 61 % of the regional surface devoted to fruitgrowing, and concentrates 95 % of the region's hydraulic resources (10^9 m³). Since 1990, a fair called *Expovalle* is competing with the FINOR for the status of the most important agricultural, mining and industrial demonstration of the North of Chile. The 1992 *Expovalle* took place in early May with a declared objective to gather more than 100 exhibitors and attract 60,000 people. To reach that

goal, big shows of a national level were organized: the 3rd Chilean *Huascos* games competition, bailing out demonstrations with the national champions, stunt performances by the national team of the Chilean Air Force, outstanding national singers, etc...

Four months after participating in the FINOR, it was indeed useful for ESO to go to Ovalle. While the more commercial FINOR attracted mostly tourists and city people, the *Expovalle* reached a different, grassroots public, equally, if not even more, curious about astronomy and ESO.

Once again, our stand with our telescope was one of the principal attractions of the fair (if not *The* one). Also, an important dissemination effort was developed during the fair: 3 conferences (one of which devoted to teach general astrophysics to students) were organized on the location of the fair; two

one-hour broadcastings took place every day, during which the audience could phone and ask questions: during one such broadcast 75 people called. This showed the very large interest, not only for astronomy in general (basic knowledge, its goals, its usefulness), but also for ESO and its future plans in Chile (the VLT of course!). Several regional personalities and a great number of professors and students visited our stand.

About 30,000 people in total visited our stand in Ovalle, of which about 7500 got "observing time". As in Peñuelas, although the stands closed at 1 a.m. we could never cut the queue before at least one hour later.

4. Dedication of ESO Staff

The success of the ESO exhibition during these two regional events could never have been so great without the



The Head of the La Silla Administration department, A. Cabillic, with officials during the opening ceremony. At the centre of the picture, the Mayor of Ovalle, Mr. E. Darrigrande.



ESO infrared operator R. Vega explaining the VLT project to a group of students.



A view of the queue to glance at Jupiter with the ESO 11-inch Celestron.



A view of the ESO 11-inch Celestron telescope. Also the youngest were much interested in seeing Jupiter!

collective and enthusiastic help of many ESO staff members in the preparation of the exhibit and in the most friendly attention to the public. In particular, we highly appreciated the competence of Messrs. Rolando Vega and Eduardo Matamoros during the setting-up of the exhibit and the telescope as well as their extraordinary patience in attending the public during observing time and the help of Mr. Jorge Peralta (attending our stand). We would also like to acknowledge the valuable assistance at La Silla of Messrs. Jaime Alonso and Aldo Pizarro who helped with the electronics of the telescope, and Armando Bruna and Victor Echeverria who built a new mount for it.

5. Conclusion

Among the large public who attended our stands and telescope, a few characters gave us some occasions to smile and we would like to share those with the readers: an old couple, after a glance at our sign (La Silla), made an immediate link with the chairs (*sillas* in Spanish) in front of our video screen, and decided to buy them on the spot (it was not easy to convince them they were not for sale!); this other man was very disappointed to realize that even with a telescope one could not watch the sun at night; that lady blamed us for reproducing in our NTT Saturn picture (the one with the white spot) the colours she had painted on some plates (after being convinced of our good faith, she left with the assurance that heavens had contacted her while she was painting!)

Other reactions were more touching: the old lady crying and kissing us for having given her the possibility to see a planet before she dies; the many people kneeling and crossing themselves to thank God for the beauty of the uni-

verse; some who just could not believe that they were actually seeing a "real" planet. Finally, one anecdote deserves special mention: with the telescope pointing at Jupiter, a drawing was made of the planet and its 4 largest "moons", with a note saying that Jupiter has 16 "moons" in total. Several women were standing near the telescope, very interested and enthusiastic about what other people were seeing, but absolutely refused to have a look at it themselves. Puzzled by such attitude we investigated the case. So we learnt that an old folkloric belief says that if a pregnant woman looked at the moon, her baby would have birthmarks. Now just imagine a poor creature whose Mom looked at 16 moons! We can credit ESO for the destruction of this belief in a number of minds.

As a scientific organization, ESO has a role to play towards the public at large (and in Chile, in particular). To spread

the knowledge about some of the mysteries of the Universe is a moral obligation every astronomer should feel (not only to justify his existence!). However, not only astronomers, but also many people working at ESO, are proud of what ESO has built in Chile, of belonging to this Organization, and they like to make our beautiful observatory known.

For that reason, it has been really satisfactory to verify, first in Peñuelas, and then in Ovalle, that the response from the public makes up for the exhausting work such efforts implied. For sure, La Silla is now well known in the IVth region of Chile and – what is maybe more important – a window towards astronomy has been opened to a population eager to understand what it is all about. For a long time, ESO was not known in Chile as it should have been. Things are changing, for the best benefit of the public at large, for the ESO employees, and hence... for Astronomy.

The Youngest Visitors Yet

The call came early in the morning from Mrs. Keller. She was at the European School in Munich, she said, and she would like to hear whether it would be possible to visit ESO with a class. It would be so interesting for the children to learn about astronomy and also to see their parents at work.

Now, some *Messenger* readers may not know that the European School in Munich is one of a dozen "European" schools, established in major European cities, where there are "European" institutions. In the case of Munich, the school there was set up and operates in close collaboration with the European

Patent Office. Children of ESO staff have access for some years under an arrangement with this organization.

It is always a particular pleasure to explain astronomy to young people and with the special relationship between this school and ESO in mind, I had little doubt that such a visit must somehow be arranged, and that a hole in the otherwise rather tight schedule of visits to the ESO Headquarters should be found.

The children had already studied the planets, Mrs. Keller said, and they were very eager to learn more. Perhaps we could show some slides? If it would not