

Report on the

2009 Joint Observatories Science Retreat in Chile

held at Hotel de la Bahia, La Serena, Chile, 9–10 July 2009

Michael West¹

¹ ESO

In Chile, an old tradition has been re-lived with a new twist. Recently, more than 50 astronomers from ESO, ALMA, Gemini, CTIO, Las Campanas and SOAR participated in a two-day Joint Observatories Science Retreat that was held in La Serena. The goal of this event was to bring together astronomers from all the major international observatories in Chile to share their science, to discuss common interests and to stimulate new research collaborations.

Chile is home to many of the world's leading astronomical observatories, including ESO's La Silla Paranal Observatory and the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA). In the past, the international observatories in Chile held regular meetings, usually focused on specific scientific topics. Unfortunately, such meetings ceased several years ago and consequently an important opportunity for observatory astronomers in Chile to interact with each other was lost. Today, despite their relative proximity,

many observatory astronomers in Chile do not know their neighbours at the other observatories.

With the goal of increasing scientific interactions between the observatories, representatives from ESO, Gemini, and the Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory (CTIO) worked together to organise a unique gathering of observatory astronomers from across Chile. More than 50 astronomers — nearly one third of them from ESO — participated in a two-day science retreat held 9–10 July at the Hotel de la Bahia on La Serena's scenic main beach. In the spirit of making this a special meeting of the observatories, distinct from other meetings that bring together the wider astronomical community in Chile, participation was limited to observatory astronomers only.

The 2009 Joint Observatories Science Retreat featured ten-minute talks in which each participant described his or her research interests and ongoing projects, plus thirty-minute talks by observatory directors (among them Andreas Kaufer from ESO and Thijs de Graauw from ALMA) with the latest news from the observatories. The breadth and depth of the research activities being pursued by observatory astronomers in Chile were impressive, as were the many exciting

developments reported by the observatory directors.

Yet perhaps even more important than the presentations were the opportunities for observatory astronomers to meet and chat informally. Social activities included a welcoming cocktail party, ample time for lunch and coffee breaks each day, and a conference dinner at one of La Serena's seaside restaurants, where the seeds of future research collaborations were planted in the company of new friends, fine food and good wine.

This gathering of kindred spirits also attracted media attention in Chile, with the country's two largest newspapers publishing articles that noted the benefits of social networking as a way for observatory astronomers to share information with their neighbours.

The 2009 Joint Observatories Science Retreat was a great success, with a strong consensus among participants that they should be continued in the future. Plans are already underway for the 2010 meeting, which will take place in Santiago and hence should allow for an even greater degree of participation by ESO and ALMA astronomers.



Credit: H. Ochoa and L. Opazo/CTIO

Participants at the 2009 Joint Observatories Science Retreat in La Serena, Chile