Fellows at ESO

Giuseppina Battaglia

I have always been amazed by the monumental efforts we humans make to understand our own nature and the world around us. When I think of astronomy, I think of us, small humans on a small planet, trying, since the dawn of time, to decipher the mysteries of the Universe — notwithstanding our limited means — yet trying, striving to understand something so immense, so complicated and remote, and yet so fascinating, or probably so fascinating exactly because it is so unreachable. For me, this is what astronomy is about.

I took my first steps as a professional astronomer at the University of Bologna where I did my undergraduate studies. In 2002 I moved to Groningen, in the Netherlands, first for a few months to work on my Masters project, and then stayed for four years to start my PhD studies. The first project I carried out as a PhD student at the Kapteyn Astronomical Institute was a study on the dark matter content of the Milky Way, analysing the kinematics of objects in its stellar halo out to a very large distance from the Galactic Centre, 120 kpc! For the main part of my project I worked on a sample of dwarf spheroidal galaxies, nearby small satellite galaxies of the Milky Way, using spectroscopic data from VLT/FLAMES for hundreds of individual stars in these systems. I used these data to derive the dark matter content of these galaxies, among the most dark matter dominated systems known to date, and to study their chemical and kinematic properties. I cherish the years I spent in Groningen, not only for the highly stimulating and friendly work environment of the Kapteyn Astronomical Institute, but also because of the many people I met along the way who made me feel at home and made my time there unforgettable.

In 2007 I moved to Germany to join ESO as a fellow. Currently at ESO Garching I still like to pursue the kind of research I carried out for my PhD and I am extending it to the types of dwarf galaxies that are found at the outskirts of the Local Group, the dwarf irregulars and the so-called transition dwarfs, with the aim of understanding whether the different dwarf types that we observe today may be the descendants of similar progenitors, or are actually intrinsically different systems. As part of my functional duties at ESO I am performing simulations to explore the feasibility of resolved stellar population studies at large distances using the European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT), the project for the largest ground-based optical and infrared telescope in the world. Working at ESO not only gives me the chance to make my own small contribution to such an exciting project as the E-ELT, but also to be in one of the places where the future direction of European astronomy is decided and where a great part of the action takes place. Definitely a very interesting place to be!

Blair Conn

As an Australian coming to Chile there were a lot of familiar aspects of life waiting for me. I'd travelled a lot in Chile in 2001 and knew what to expect from the scenery and that, like Australians, Chileans are fairly laid back. The seasons weren't backwards and when gazing up at the night sky from La Silla, the stars were reassuringly like home and Christmas in summer is perfectly normal. Originally scheduled for Paranal, a hasty meeting was organised soon after I arrived and it was decided I'd go to La Silla to work on the Wide Field Imager at the MPG/ESO 2.2-metre telescope. In the three years since then I've had a wonderful experience at the La Silla Observatory and will miss it dearly.

As I sit here writing this, on the 9th of August, my last night as a support astronomer on La Silla, it certainly feels sad to be leaving this place. In all my visits here I've never grown tired of the mountains — they have this quiet majesty that creates a very special atmosphere of calm and tranquility. The gentle hues of the desert slowly turn red with the setting Sun and make it really feel like a privilege to be a witness to this transformation. But the real show is at night, when the Moon is yet to appear, and the Milky Way stretches across the entire sky in one vast ceiling of stars. I am pleasantly surprised that after all this time up here I'm still amazed at how beautiful it is. It is probably time to leave astronomy if I ever get cynical about the night sky.

Most people I talk to agree that La Silla is one of the special observatories of the world, remarking that it has a real family atmosphere amongst all who work and visit here, and I think it's true. There is always a smile and a laugh accompanying any task and my time working closely with the telescope operators and the engineering staff has been a great learning experience and lots of fun. They have really shown me what it means to work at an observatory. The small, but dedicated team, of La Silla astronomers have been a wonderful support when the going got tough or when a healthy dose of humour was needed. I have often relied on them to help me find solutions to the tricky problems that surface from time to time.

Before coming to Chile I was doing my PhD at The University of Sydney and now, as I move into my fourth year as an ESO fellow, I'm heading off to the Max-Planck-Institut für Astronomie in Heidelberg. There will be many new challenges ahead, least of all learning some German, and I'm excited about having the chance to live in Europe. I'm sure though that my time spent in Chile and especially here at the Observatory will stay with me. This place has become a second home to me and I'm already looking forward to when I can return.