

Fellows at ESO



Jean-Baptiste Le Bouquin

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I started astronomy in quite an unusual way. I first studied heat engines and other sorts of machinery using thermal energy. Having been lured into an increasing passion for physics, I continued studying fundamental physics for several more years.

There came a time when I had to choose between particle physics and astrophysics. My wife found the best strategy to make this dramatic choice: look at the potential colleagues in both areas and assess how they were set up in life (properly dressed or not, with family or not, etc.). The “vote” definitely went to astrophysics!

I completed my PhD thesis in the city of Grenoble, in the French Alps, conveniently located near numerous ski resorts. I visited Paranal once during my graduate studies, where I worked on the VLTI and was definitely impressed by this huge machine. Press a button and you have two giant telescopes pointing together and unveiling the mysteries of some unknown stars. I decided to be part of this adventure.

I arrived at ESO in April 2006. I devoted a significant part of my duties and research time to improving the abilities of the VLTI. I greatly appreciated sharing the work with engineers, technicians and astronomers. I am proud of what has been achieved within these last three years. As well as

managing technical challenges, we have succeeded in getting unprecedented astrophysical results. I am now in the fourth year of my ESO fellowship and thinking about future projects and the next generation of VLTI instrumentation that will use the four giant telescopes together.

My wife and I have enjoyed Chile immensely — the people, nature, food, and all the new friends we now have. Moreover, we will leave Chile with two everlasting souvenirs: our son Tobie and our daughter Anaëlle.

Hugues Sana

11 961 km... That’s the distance between Liège and Santiago. 11 961 km... it is difficult to get further away. It is further than the US West coast, Hong Kong or Beijing, and even further than Tokyo. The only way to go further would be to head for Australia, to some small Pacific island or to Antarctica.

11 961 km... it is not the other side of the world, but it is getting close and that is the adventure I had the chance to take up about three years ago when I was offered a fellowship position at ESO. It was on a Wednesday morning, two days before Christmas, 1145 days ago and 11 961 km away from where I am sitting right now.

Since then, I have enjoyed 54 Lan Chile snack boxes, delighted in 233 wonderful sunsets in Paranal and survived 671 rides from my house in Santiago to the Vitacura office. In Paranal, I had the opportunity to

be trained on two UTs, Antu and Kueyen, performing over 1500 OBs for a cumulative open shutter time of 587 hours. Given the ratio of the instrument aperture sizes, it would have taken 17 290 years for Galileo to collect as many photons as I did.

But the most impressive part is not about numbers, sizes or advanced technology (although they are very impressive), it is about the people, working around the clock, away from family, often tired because of the workload, stress and lack of sleep. It is about their problem-solving attitude, their constant mood and their incredible motivation. My ESO fellowship has certainly been a wonderful challenge and one of the most intense life experiences. If I had to summarise what I learned in a single word, it would be “balance”. Balance between observatory duties, science time, private life and personal development, and what it takes, as a juggler, to keep that many balls flying in the air.

About me — I obtained my PhD at Liège University in 2005, working on optical and X-ray spectroscopy of massive stars. After an additional year in Liège, I moved to ESO/Chile in May 2006. In Paranal, I first joined the CRIRES instrument team before taking over the enjoyable task of UVES instrument scientist, where I am learning what it takes to have an instrument working to the best of its performance. In Santiago, I pursue my own research projects on massive stars, taking advantage of the active collaboration of a dozen colleagues working in the nearby field of stellar clusters.



Hugues Sana