

Virtual Visits to Astronomical Observatories

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The "Observatorio del Teide" (OT), located in the island of Tenerife together with the "Observatorio del Roque de Los Muchachos" (ORM), in the island of La Palma, both operated by the Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias (IAC, Canary Islands, Spain), are considered one of the best observing sites in the world. Their excellent geographical situation and the splendid atmospheric conditions governing during the most part of the year, make them play a primary role in the present observational science scenario. At present, more than 20 European countries are installed their telescopes in the Canary Observatories. Whereas OT is mainly devoted to solar installations the ORM hosts large night telescopes.

One of the aims of the IAC is the scientific outreach. Between the different activities carried out are the visits to the observatories. Although every year more than 10,000 people visit both observatories we have identified two fundamental problems:

1) the visitors cannot enter to large telescope domes due to security reasons or because the telescope is operating (solar installations during day time).

2) the number of visitors is limited.

In order to surpass the previous problems a new system of virtual visits has been installed. Using a total of 10 webcams (with Alt-Azimuth movements) located in different places of the observatory (external and telescope domes) it is possible to make a virtual visit.

Using a dedicated software it is possible to define different "tours" to show the observatory and telescopes through Internet. The new system also improves normal guided "tours" with live images of instrumentation using the webcams installed inside telescope domes. The system has begun to work in the OT and once tested it will settle in the ORM.