

## The International Year of Astronomy 2009 in Belgium

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### Abstract

As far as the communication of astronomy is concerned, Belgium is well endowed with many planetariums, public observatories, amateur astronomical societies, science centres and renowned astronomical institutes. But, as in many countries that are well supplied with cultural activities, numerous opportunities for sightseeing and many entertainment parks, the stakeholders who are willing to promote astronomy to the public have to stand out continuously to keep attracting people. The International Year of Astronomy 2009 is the perfect opportunity to help the Belgian people to focus even more on astronomy.

### Astronomy in Belgium

Astronomy is a particularly rich subject in Belgium. Indeed, its 10 million inhabitants have access to:

- seven public observatories;
- six planetariums;
- more than 80 amateur astronomical clubs or working groups (established in associations like VVS — Vereniging Voor Sterrenkunde);
- five science centres;
- eight world class astronomical institutes;
- industries connected to ESO (VLT) and ESA's large projects.

Thus both astronomy aficionados and those who are curious have a vast choice of competent facilities at their disposal to welcome and guide them.

Furthermore, besides this choice of activities, amateurs and professionals involved in astronomy can participate in a series of regular events that aim to publicise the sciences in general and more particularly astronomy:

- star-gazing events (Sterrenkijkdagen, De Nachten, La Nuit des Etoiles);
- science festivals (Wetenschapsfeest, Ruimtevaarddagen, Expo-Sciences, Printemps des Sciences);
- open doors (Kinderuniversiteit [KULeuven], Royal Observatory of Belgium, Experimentarium [ULB]);
- international events (Researchers' Night [European Union], Science on Stage, International Years [Heliophysical, Polar, Earth]).

## Competition between events

These regular events allow the stakeholders promoting astronomy to attract the interest of the media and the general public. But all the other “cultural” vocations have their own events calendar as well. Located in the heart of Europe, there is a wealth of events for the public: Night of the Museums, Spring of the Museums, Monuments’ Day, Movie Day, Jazz Marathon, and other various celebrations.

Even if the target-public is not necessarily the same for all events it can be difficult to attract the attention of the media and the general public. As a recent example, we cite the Researcher’s Night on 28 September, which was bracketed by the Celebration of the French-speaking Community and the Brussels Museums’ Night on the 27<sup>th</sup> and with the White Night on the 29<sup>th</sup>, i.e. several events on successive evenings competing for the attention of young people!



Figure 1 – The “Nuit des Etoiles” poster.



Figure 3 – The “Researchers’ Night” poster.

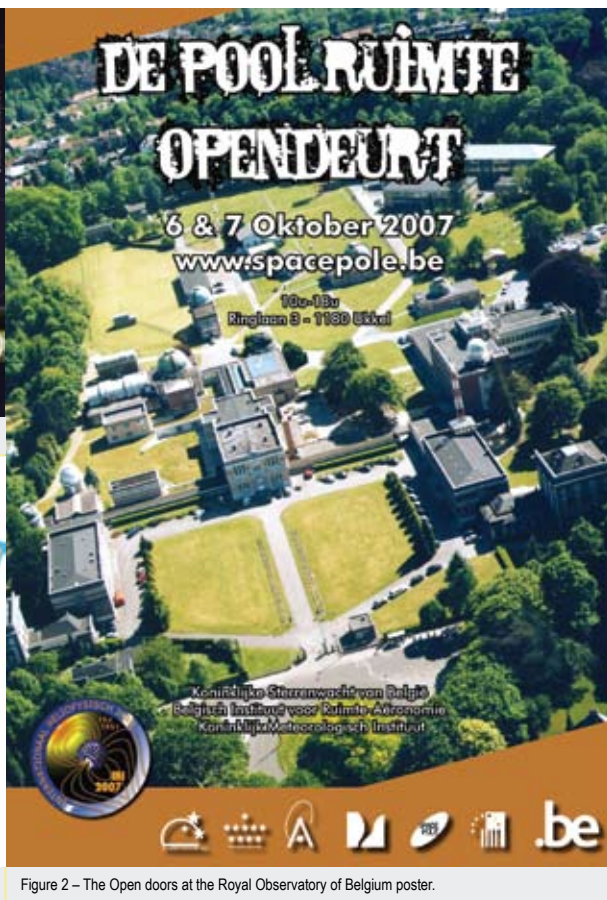


Figure 2 – The Open doors at the Royal Observatory of Belgium poster.

## Added value of the International Year of Astronomy 2009

In this context, an event like the International Year of Astronomy 2009 makes it easy to arouse the interest of the general public and to attract media attention due to:

1. its unique character and fixed time period (2009);
2. the support of prestigious institutions (IAU, UNESCO, maybe UNO);
3. its international scale (nearly a hundred participating countries).

A Belgian Steering Committee has been set up to define and bring to a successful conclusion a series of actions for IYA2009. It includes the major stakeholders promoting astronomy in Belgium, both at the amateur and professional level:

- Universities (of Leuven, Gent, Liège, Brussels, Namur);
- Research institutes (Royal Observatory of Belgium, Belgian Institute for Space Aeronomy);
- Authorities (Senate);
- Amateur associations (Vereniging Voor Sterrenkunde, Astro Event Group, Fédération Francophone d'Astronomes Amateurs de Belgique, Société Astronomique de Liège);
- Public observatories and planetariums (Urania, Mira, Altair, Beisbroek, Astronamur, Club Astronomique d'Ottignies, Astronomie Centre Ardennes, Observatoire Fleurus-Sivry, Euro-planetarium, Planetarium of Brussels).

Among the many possibilities under consideration, we can already mention:

- Theatre drama on Galileo Galilei (several companies have been contacted);
- Foucault pendulum (to be installed in a church in Liège);
- Astronomy Olympiad (the Senate can host the final competition);
- TV broadcast of *Tous sur Orbite*, a current astronomy programme (5 minutes daily);
- Special stamp edition;
- 3 national dates for star-gazing events (instead of 1 + 1 + 1: per region/association);
- Astronomical city tour;
- Special edition of the magazine *Science Connection* (edited by the Federal Science Policy), dedicated to astronomy in Belgium;
- Weekly astronomical fact sheets (for the press and the website);
- Astronomy kits (collaboration between planetariums);
- Conferences;
- Travelling exhibition.

## Conclusion

The Steering Committee is willing to implement many actions that will benefit from the support and enthusiasm of all the main stakeholders promoting astronomy in Belgium. Indeed, given the tough competition between all cultural events, the International Year of Astronomy 2009 is the perfect opportunity to help the Belgian people to really focus on astronomy and its achievements.