

# Moonstruck

**M**anhattan, just before dusk. Jeffrey Jacobs sets up his eight-inch telescope on the sidewalk on the corner of Bleecker Street and Sixth Avenue, in Greenwich Village, where the buildings barely scrape the sky. He focuses on the crescent moon in the southwest, a few degrees above a brick townhouse. Then he waits—but not for long. A family of four walks past, all staring at the telescope.

"Come look," Jacobs invites them. They pause, their faces betraying suspicion. What's he selling? This is New York City. Everyone's scamming someone.

"Come take a look," Jacobs urges. He's a neat, graying man wearing steel-rimmed glasses, khaki pants, and a light blue Hawaiian shirt. The family hesitates, but Dad decides that Jacobs presents no threat. He peers first.

"Wow," says Dad, turning it over to Son.

"How many craters can you see?" Jacobs asks Son, who's wearing braces and an earring.

"Eighteen," he says, shrugging. Tough crowd. It's hard to impress a 13-year-old.

Other passersby spot the family and the telescope. Curiosity gets the best of them.

"You just bring it out," someone asks Jacobs.

"Yes."

"Even if it's really cold?"

"Yes." Jacobs, 60, preaches astronomy on Manhattan's sidewalks maybe 10 nights a month for a couple of hours at a time, when it's cloudless and the moon or Jupiter or Saturn is visible in the early evening. He has a job, as well as a wife whom he doesn't want to turn into an astronomy widow. Sidewalk astronomers have their own Web site

([sidewalkastronomers.us](http://sidewalkastronomers.us)), and two unwritten rules. Rule Number One: Share the telescope.

"Can I see?"

"Absolutely," Jacobs says. "Come take a look."

A gay couple saunters up. "Any green moon men?" the shorter man asks.

"Most of them are on Bleecker Street," Jacobs says. "Come, take a look." The shorter one peers into the eyepiece. Then his partner does the same.

"What do you think?"

"I think it's made of cheese," the partner says.

"Wow!" exclaims a woman in a white T-shirt while she takes a look. "Thank you."

"That's amazing," a bearded man says.

"Yes it is," Fox says. "It's your moon."

"Can I look?" says a tall, thin woman

puffing on a cigarette.

"Absolutely," he tells her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"You want to look at the moon?" he asks a woman wearing a green shirt and black pants.

"Sure," she says, walking over.

"All of Manhattan can fit into one of those craters," he tells her.

"Holy crap!" she says.

"Do you just hang out on the corner with your telescope?"

"Yes. What could be more fun?"

"I want your telescope."

An hour passes, the sky darkens, and Jupiter blooms a few degrees to the right of the crescent moon. Jacobs turns the telescope. A man peers into the eyepiece.

"I see four stars in a line around it," he says after a moment.

"Those are the Galilean moons," Jacobs says.

"I can see bands across it. It's tiny."

"More than thirteen hundred Earths can fit inside," Jacobs says.

"It moves out of view within a couple of minutes," a Hispanic man adds.

"That's because we're moving,"

Jacobs tells him. "Seven hundred miles per hour." The man pauses to consider that.

"We get so little astronomy in school," Jacobs explains later. "Yet it's exciting, the effect that it has on people. They're walking by, inside their own heads, then someone stops them to show them our own moon. They're so grateful for that."

A black woman with short hair passes by. "Deep Space Nine!" she calls out, and keeps on walking.

Jupiter slowly descends behind the building, so Jacobs refocuses on the moon.

"Let me get my glasses on," says a

woman with long hair.

"You don't need glasses," Jacobs says.

"Lean in slowly and take a look. Adjust the eyepiece."

"It's rocky. It looks beat-up," she says.

"You want money?"

"It's your moon," he says, almost defensively. "We don't talk money. Ever." (That's Rule Number Two.)

"Wow!" she says, bending over the telescope for another look. "It's amazing. Are you going to be here tomorrow?"

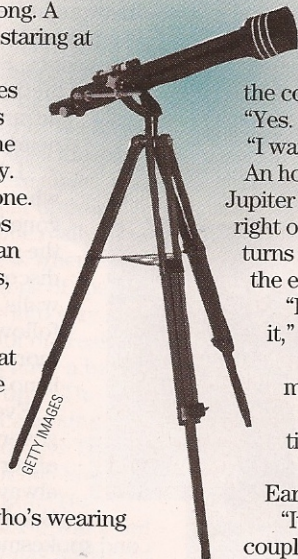
"No ma'am," he says, "but I'll be here next week."

"Thank you," she says. "Thank you so very much."

"You're very welcome."

"Thank you," she says again, before she disappears in the crowd.

—Phil Scott



## Pssst: Want a Mega-Runway?

**W**ith the last 220-mph touchdown of a winged orbiter at Florida's Kennedy Space Center slated for sometime in 2010, NASA has a dilemma: What to do with the runway?

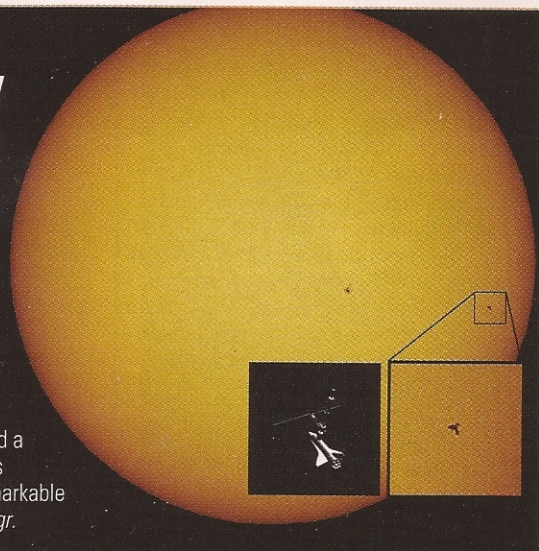
Paved in the mid-1970s in the middle of a marsh full of alligators, the concrete strip—at 15,000 feet long and 300 feet wide, one of the world's most spacious—has been the end point for 61 of the 112 space shuttle missions flown successfully since 1981. Only rarely does the U.S. government lay open a valuable national asset like this. "We don't retire the space shuttle every day either," notes Jim Ball, Kennedy's spaceport development manager.

Late last summer NASA solicited expressions of interest from potential users. Officials said the request was the first step in deciding how and when to "expand access" to the capacity that's

### IN ORBIT

## Forecast: Hot and Sunny

**S**pace shuttle *Discovery*, docked with the International Space Station, transits the sun on July 28, two days after the shuttle was launched on its first flight in two and a half years. Astronomer Anthony Ayiomamitis captured this image from his home in Athens, Greece. "It has been a serious chase for the past four years, trying to get this photo," he says. "My three earlier attempts failed due to the weather and a miscalibrated cellular phone, but I was fourth-time lucky." For more of his remarkable celestial imagery, visit [www.perseus.gr](http://www.perseus.gr).



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