**TEXT 2**

**Stargazing in Scotland: a holiday where dark skies are welcome**

*Our writer enlists an astronomer to get to grips with negotiating the stars – and the 300-square mile*

*Dark Sky Park in Galloway, Scotland, the first such place in Britain.*

The Guardian

Do you live by the moon? Steve Owens does. On nights when there is no moon, Steve goes to work, and tonight he's out on a lonely hill in Dumfries and Galloway with his telescope.

"We'll take a look," he says. "Jupiter should be visible."

Half an hour later, we are admiring several Jovian moons and wondering if we can stay awake to greet the rings of Saturn. Around us the sheep on the upland pastures are silent, a tawny owl hoots in the dark woods below, and there is just a single electric light visible, from the farm in the valley.

"I'll talk to them," says Steve. "That lamp could be shielded."

It has become something of a passion for Steve, the darkness. He is the world's only dark skies consultant and author of Stargazing for Dummies, a great introduction to finding and naming the objects in the night sky. I had come across Steve through his Twitter feed, which is a wonderful source of up-to-the-minute stargazing tips. When I discovered that he did personal stargazing lessons in Galloway's 300-square-mile Dark Sky Park, the first such place in Britain, I leapt at the chance.

"There is very little light pollution here," says Steve. "But if you go deep into the park, the best darkness is at Glentrool."

The best darkness is probably not near you, not if you live in the average British town or city. Holding back the night has been a human obsession for centuries, but it got a massive power boost when Joseph Swan commercialised production of the light bulb in the 1880s. In the rush to electrification and modernity, a few people warned of the dangers for migratory birds, nocturnal wildlife and candle manufacturers, but no one seems to have considered the human being.

Might darkness-deprivation be bad for us? Medical researchers have certainly begun to think so. Studies have linked darkness-deprivation to increased levels of cancers and depression. The death of darkness is bad news for astronomy, too, cutting the flow of information and also the number of young people who know their way around a night sky.

In the 1990s, two US astronomers, David Crawford and Tim Hunter, were so concerned by the effects on their science that they started the International Dark-Sky Association, which now has accredited a dozen parks worldwide as places that value their darkness and protect it. There is even the world's first "dark park" city: Flagstaff, Arizona. In the UK, we have Dumfries and Galloway, plus reserves in Wales, Exmoor and the Channel Islands, and hopefully some more to come.

The truth for most of us, however, is that darkness in the UK is light years away. So I decided the best thing to do was pack up and visit south-west Scotland, which coincidentally is one of the least visited and most beautiful areas of Britain.

During the day I had cycled part of the Southern Upland Way and seen just one solitary sheep farmer. This magnificent 212-mile, coast-to-coast route ought to be required travelling for sword-and-sorcery novelists: even the few miles I covered could have fuelled several Tolkien novels with its place names: Rig of the Jarkness, Clints of the Buss, Nick of Torr and the unforgettable peak of Curleywee.