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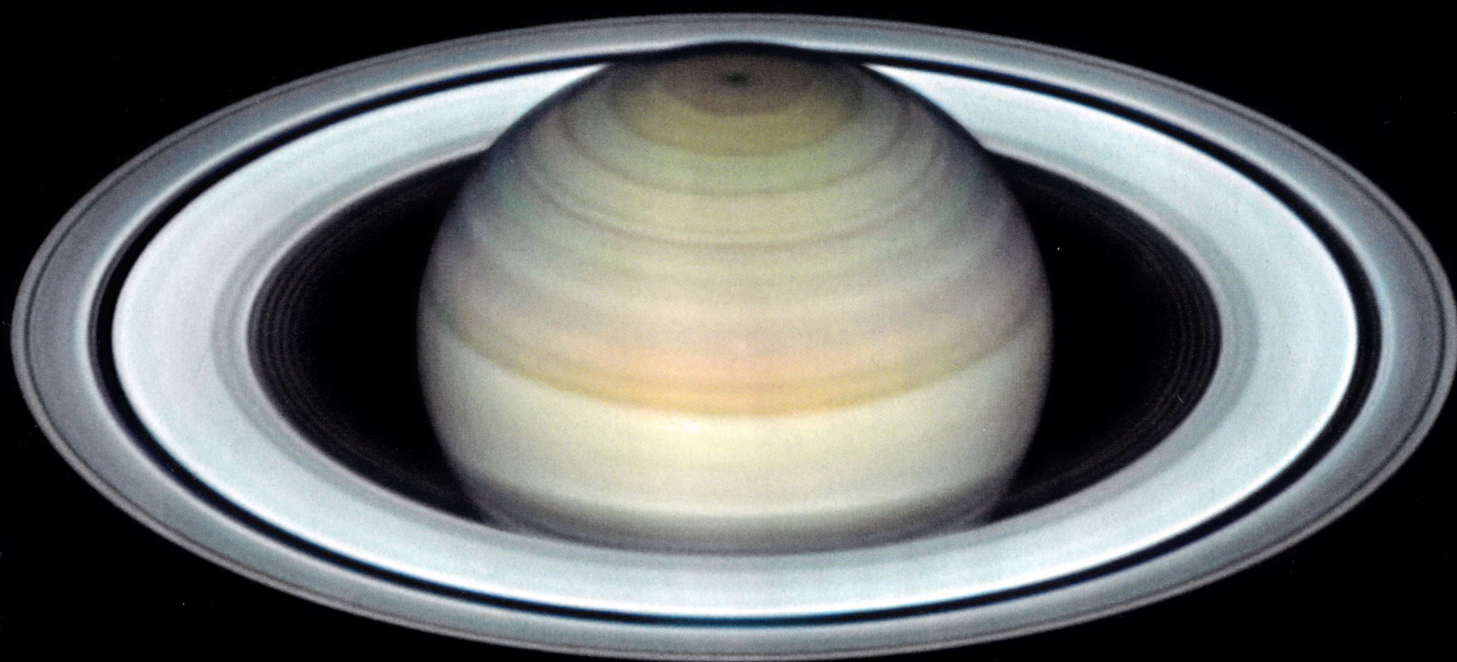
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The Sharpest Ground Based Image of Saturn Ever!

Saturn near opposition from Pic du Midi

When editor, David Moore first saw this image of Saturn, his reaction was: "This is truly amazing! I nearly fell off my seat!" The remarkable image was captured by a team of seven observers, including Marc Delcroix and Ricardo Hueso (who featured last month in the Jovian flash story) and Damian Peach (readers will know his images from *The Sky at Night* and his public lecture to Astronomy Ireland in 2004, get a copy of it at www.astronomy.ie/dvd). They achieved the image using the 105cm F/17 Cassegrain at Pic du Midi, in the Pyrénées, France, on June 11th.

"We spent three nights at the observatory where we obtained many fine images of various planetary targets. Seeing conditions were mostly excellent each night," said Damian.

"This Saturn image may well be the sharpest ground-based image of the planet ever obtained. Rarely seen details are observed (such as small ringlets with Ring C, including the Maxwell and Colombo divisions.) The Encke division is easily observed around the entire A ring. Note the strong blue colouration of the southern hemisphere shining through the Cassini division," he continued.

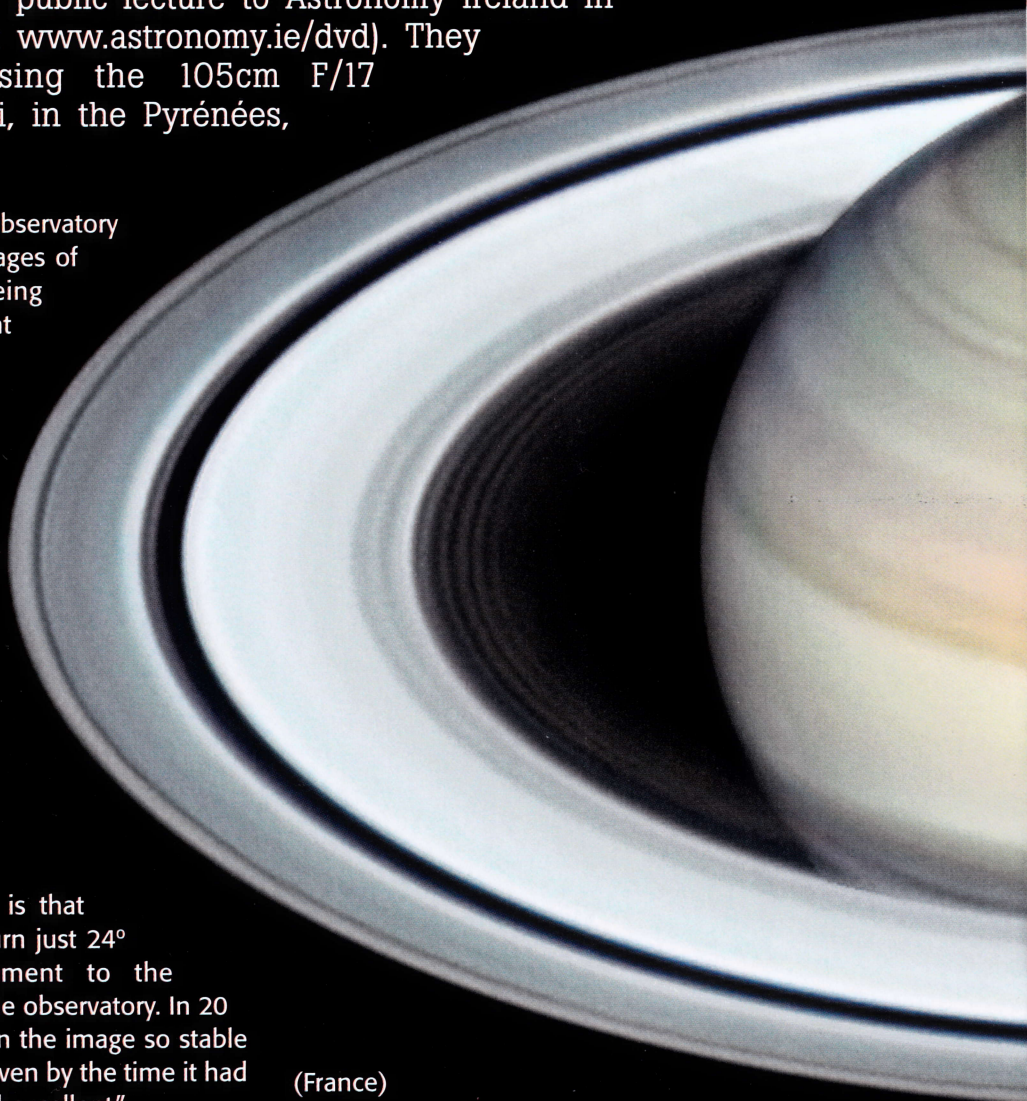
"Perhaps most remarkable of all is that this result was obtained with Saturn just 24° above the horizon - a testament to the exceptional seeing conditions at the observatory. In 20 years of imaging, never have I seen the image so stable with the planet so low in the sky. Even by the time it had dropped to 17° the image was still excellent."

Marc Delcroix, amateur astronomer and long-time user of the one-metre professional telescope at Pic du Midi Observatory, France, told us that he organized a Europlanet 2020 RI funded workshop with François Colas, PI of the instrument.

"The aim of this mission was to invite and train advanced famous amateur astronomers Damian Peach (UK), Emil Kraaikamp (Netherlands), Gerard Therin

(France) and Constantin Sprianu (Romania), along with professional planetary scientist Ricardo Hueso from Spain," said Marc.

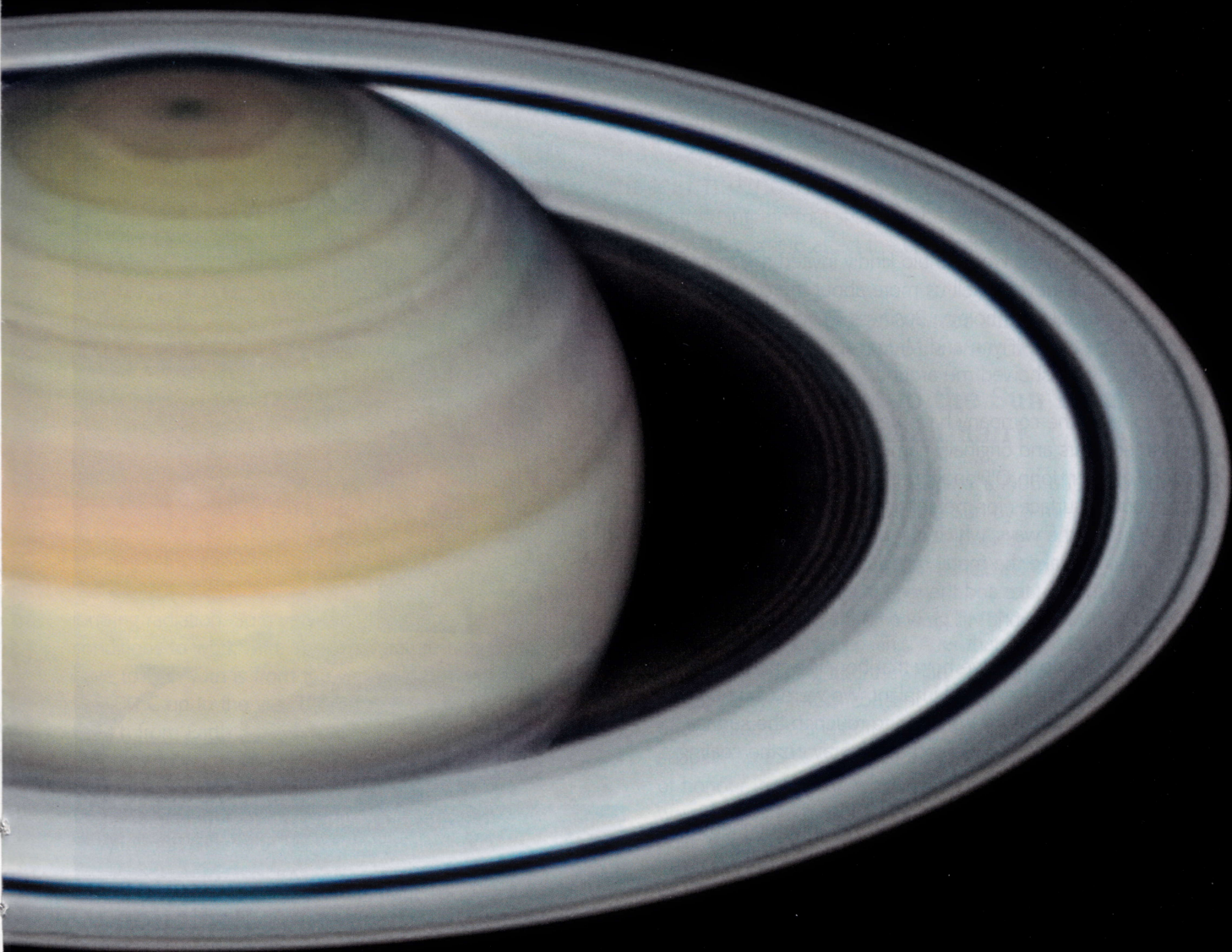
"The resulting images of the planets Venus, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune are of excellent quality and of utmost interest for the professionals to study their atmospheres. In particular this Saturn image, taken by the whole team and processed by Damian Peach, shows



atmospheric features like cloud, the boreal pole hexagon and its central vortex, and incredible details in the structure of the rings even in the darker C-ring. This despite a very low elevation of the planet at the time of the picture - a bare 24° - showing the excellent quality of the sky from the 2877m high Pic du Midi observatory."

"The goal is to have such missions with some members of the so called "Pic-Net" team performed regularly to help study regularly the atmosphere of our solar system planets." Marc concluded.

We think readers will agree that this is a truly jaw-dropping image of Saturn. Congratulations to the team! With the Cassini mission to Saturn about to end next month, with a death-plunge into the giant planet's atmosphere, we feel it is a fitting tribute to the mission.



Saturn near opposition from Pic du Midi

Credit: Emil Kraaikamp/Marc Delcroix/Damian Peach/G rard Therin/Constantin Sprianu/Ricard Hueso/Fran ois Colas/SP2 /IMCCE/OMP (supported by Europlanet 2020 RI)