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When the Northridge earthquake knocked out most power lines in Los Angeles in 1994, the local observatory started getting phone calls: What was the "strange sky" they had seen that night? With the lights out, people were seeing stars like the Milky Way for the first time—and as city dwellers, the sight was unrecognizable. A new photography project is based on the same premise: If you live in a city and you're not a camper, you might never have seen what the night sky actually looks like, thanks to light pollution. For their new book, which they are now crowdfunding for on Kickstarter, two photographers plan to travel both to some of the darkest places in the country—with the most spectacular night skies—and to document light pollution in and near cities. "We're trying to bring this to people who have never seen it, to just sort of jar at their imagination, get them inspired to at least go out and look," says Harun Mehmedinovic, who is collaborating with Gavin Heffernan on the new book. The pair met while studying at the American Film Institute in L.A., and started working on timelapse photos in nearby parks as a way to escape the city. "When we got out of the city and under the stars, that's when we realized what we were missing in the first place," says Heffernan. "It's so easy to take for granted, or just say that the night sky is a pretty thing you can live without, but we started to talk about it and realized the connection is more profound than just beauty." As more people live in cities, an estimated 80% of the world population has never seen the Milky Way. While around 2,500 stars might be visible in a rural area on an average night, only 200 or 300 can be seen in a suburb, and fewer than a dozen in a city. In the book, the photographers plan to focus on the beauty of the sky. "We want to get people inspired before we try to educate people, because we find that's the best way to do it, rather than the other way around," says Heffernan. "Our hope is by capturing the northern lights, and going to Yosemite and a lot of these incredible locations, we can sort of get the inspiration going, show these incredible things that are still out there, and then start to slowly put the message in about what we can do to fix it." They may also create composite photos, as they have in the past, that show what the sky would look like in L.A. or Vegas without city lights. "Sometimes it's just that one image that really gets people's minds going—seeing the milky way on top of the Hollywood sign," Heffernan says. "Suddenly it just kind of speaks to the issue in a way that 10 pages of text can't do as effectively." While light pollution obscures the stars, it also leads to other problems, from disrupting the path of migrating birds to making it harder for humans to sleep. Researchers have also linked bright city lights to disease. The problem actually isn't that difficult to fix through better design; many lights, for example, point up at night, wasting power while they light up the sky unnecessarily. "Many of the changes that are necessary are not huge—they don't require changing your whole life or spending twice as much money, or anything like that," says Heffernan. The artists hope that the project helps lead to more support for programs like one in Phoenix, Arizona, which is aiming to become the first major dark sky city in the U.S. "It's interesting because it's an issue that bridges divided people," says Mehmedinovic. "People in Arizona might be on both sides of the fence with something like global warming, but they're on the same side with the stars. It's undeniable what's happening with light pollution. I think the majority of the world will be our allies on this, but they maybe haven't thought about it or digested it yet. That's kind of what this project is about." Light pollution can also serve as a metaphor for other environmental challenges. "There are many problems out there, and a lot of them seem to be more pressing—water running out, or climate change, or all these other issues," says Heffernan. "But our feeling is that the light pollution issue is indicative of the greater problem. It's really about the issue of ecological integrity, and the personal price we have to pay for the technology that we experience every day. We really believe that it's an iconic issue." iCandi Apps makes a series of popular star gazing apps designed to let iPhone owners discover constellations, stars, planets, satellites, and more just by pointing an iPhone at the sky. For kids and people interested in learning more about the night sky, these kind of apps are invaluable, and now iCandi Apps has released a new device for home astronomers -- the Night Sky MiniScope. Night Sky MiniScope is a full portable telescope that attaches to your iPhone and pairs with the Night Sky app so you can capture photographs of stars, planets, the Moon, and more. Night Sky MiniScope is not cheap, priced at \$349, but it's undeniably unique. I want to make it clear that this review is written from a layperson's point of view. I have never owned a telescope, I don't do astrophotography, and I can't review the Night Sky MiniScope comparative to other similarly priced telescopes because I don't have a point of reference. I'm coming to this review as someone who has an iPhone, an interest in stargazing apps, and experience with photography, so testing the MiniScope is a new experience for me. The Hardware iCandi Apps packages the Night Sky MiniScope beautifully. It comes in a custom-designed box that houses the telescope itself, the miniature tripod, case adapters for six different iPhone models, lens caps, and a carry case. The Night Sky MiniScope is made from a brushed aluminum that matches the aluminum finish on the iPhone. It's much smaller than a standard telescope and is compact enough to fit into a backpack or a large purse, so it can be taken along on a hike or a camping trip. It's not going to fit in a pocket or anything, but it's more portable than the average telescope. It measures in at 2.44 inches in diameter and 8.86 inches in length, and is about the size of a 16-ounce soda bottle. It weighs just over a pound, so while it can add a decent amount of bulk to a small pack, it's not adding a lot of weight. Despite the lightness, it's a well-made and sturdy product that has a high-quality look and feel. The MiniScope uses "multi-coated high grade optical glass elements" for the lens and eyepiece, along with a manual adjustment focus system that also works with the Night Sky app. With the included case adapters, which are cases that let the iPhone screw on to the eyepiece of the telescope, it can work with the iPhone 4s, 5, 5c, 5s, 6, and 6 Plus. While the Night Sky MiniScope itself feels like a solid piece of equipment, the same cannot be said for the mini tripod it ships with. For any camera or telescope, a stable mounting solution is as important as optics, and that's one area where the Night Sky MiniScope falls way short. It is nearly impossible to keep the lens stable enough to focus on something in the sky with the ball-jointed mini tripod, which is neither heavy enough to prevent wobbling or tall enough to be easy to use. At just about six inches tall, it's so close to the ground that it's difficult to see the iPhone screen and even more difficult to focus the MiniScope upwards. Using the MiniScope with the mini tripod, I had to sit on the ground alongside it or place it on a table or rock located further up from the ground. When using it that way, I was never really able to find a flat enough surface outside, which meant I couldn't get it into a stable position. Even on the ground, it's so light that attempting to turn the focus ring changed its position 100 percent of the time. Finding something as simple as the Moon was challenging with the mini tripod because I'd locate the Moon, turn the focus wheel, and lose it from my field of view. On the MiniScope itself, there's a lot of resistance when rotating the lens to focus it, another factor that made the MiniScope frustrating to use because it results in movement. The MiniScope includes a 1/4"-20 tripod mount, so I mounted it on a more stable full-sized tripod (not included). That made it easier to use because I put the MiniScope and my iPhone at eye level so I could see what I was doing, but even on a much more sturdy tripod, I had problems with the amount of movement attempting to focus introduced because the lens is hard to turn. On its website, iCandi Apps calls the twist to focus mechanism "soft and effortless," but this was not my experience. Images The Night Sky MiniScope has a lens with an objective diameter of 25mm, 50x optical magnification, and a 55mm f/4 aperture. With the Night Sky app, the MiniScope is advertised as having 500x digital zoom capabilities (through a 10x digital magnification), but as anyone who's taken a zoomed in photo on an iPhone knows, digital zoom is of negligible value and is only going to produce images that are blurry. With 50x optical zoom, a planet like Venus looks like a small dot. Zooming in makes the dot bigger, but it's no clearer and it looks like a bright blob because the 500x zoom isn't adding more detail -- it's just zooming in on a tiny image. I should also mention that the focusing issues present with just the 50x optical magnification are emphasized with the digital zoom. When looking at something like the Moon at "500x zoom" even the tiniest movement will cause the Moon to shift out of frame, so it takes a lot of careful adjustments to get an image in focus. One of the best Moon shots I was able to get. A magnification of 500x may sound impressive to amateur star enthusiasts looking at the MiniScope, but it's important to know that magnification is not a measure of quality. A small telescope like the MiniScope is not powerful enough to get a close-up look at most objects in the night sky, and the 500x zoom is more of a gimmick than a useful feature. Aside from the Moon, most photos taken with the Night Sky MiniScope are going to look like dots in the sky, so if you're aiming for impressive images, this is not a telescope that's going to produce what you're looking for. So, what can you see with a telescope like the Night Sky MiniScope? The Moon is, of course, the easiest celestial body to see, and the MiniScope works well enough that you can view fine details like craters. Planets like Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, and Mars are visible through the MiniScope, but like I said, they look like small dots. Or blurry ones, if you zoom in. The MiniScope can't be used to look at the sun, and as for stars, they look like they do with the naked eye. With the Night Sky app, long exposures of stars can be taken to capture star trails. I got some nice photos of the Moon with the MiniScope, but beyond that, I wasn't able to take any photos that I'd want to share on Instagram. Some of the images I took are shared above, and more have been uploaded to an album that can be found here. I live in an area with high light pollution, so better images may come from areas where there's less light. 17 minute star exposure, via iCandi Apps Looking at the Night Sky MiniScope gallery on the iCandi Apps site is a good way to get an idea of what you see through the telescope, since it undoubtedly contains an assortment of the best shots the company was able to capture. It includes pictures of Saturn, Venus, and Jupiter, plus examples of star trail images. As you can see in the below image of Venus and Jupiter, planets don't look particularly impressive. Jupiter and Venus, via iCandi Apps The Night Sky MiniScope isn't limited to nighttime use. It can be used to capture pictures of objects during the day as well, and the 50x optical zoom comes in handy for shots of far away trees and buildings. With a lot of patience, it could be used to capture close up shots of wildlife. Night Sky App The MiniScope is designed to be used solely with the Night Sky app. The idea is to locate a star, planet, satellite, or constellation with the app and then use the MiniScope to get a closer look. For those unfamiliar with the Night Sky app, it uses your location to display the constellations, stars, planets, and satellites that are above you. The app includes a MiniScope dedicated mode with several photography tools for capturing and enhancing images. At the top of the display, there's a readout on ISO, zoom, and exposure, and at the bottom, there's a camera button. Pressing the camera button captures an image with a three-second delay, which helps to make sure the MiniScope is still when taking a photo. Tapping the iPhone screen can jolt the position of the MiniScope, so it's best to use a remote trigger. The Night Sky app includes an Apple Watch app that can display what's on the iPhone's screen and capture a photo. It's a useful addition to the MiniScope setup if you have an Apple Watch. There are a selection of tools within the app, including the aforementioned long exposure mode for capturing star trails and a video mode for creating videos. Light absorption enhancement tools allow for exposure and ISO to be adjusted to make an image brighter, and a noise reduction mode cuts down on graininess. Optimal pre-sets for shooting the Moon, planets, and stars are available, and there are modes for the 500x zoom and an in-app focus tool for making some fine adjustments to focus. There's a tutorial that I would recommend any MiniScope user check out to get familiar with the tools, because the interface can be a bit confusing with each tool represented by just an icon. Digital tools in the Night Sky app are useful, but many of the adjustment options aren't going to have a huge impact on how photos come out. The iPhone camera can only do so much at night, even with a \$349 telescope attached. I'd also like to point out one major issue I had with the Night Sky app - crashing. It crashed frequently when I was trying to use the different MiniScope tools. There are several different versions of the app, including a standard version, a free version and a pro version. All of them have additional in-app purchases to unlock features, and neither of the paid apps is included in the purchase price of the telescope, which is disappointing. After spending \$349, customers are expected to spend another \$2 for an app and even more money to unlock information packs. Bottom Line The Night Sky MiniScope is a neat iOS accessory, but its price point vs. quality leaves me wondering who it's aimed at. At \$349, it's too expensive for a toy for kids or for an amateur astronomer, but at the same time, the quality doesn't seem good enough for serious enthusiasts based on the research I did. iCandi Apps was aiming to create something super portable that could be tossed in a backpack and taken on a hike or a camping trip, and the MiniScope is a success in that regard. It's easy to carry and has the potential to capture a nice shot of the Moon while out on a nighttime hike. From the point of view of someone who doesn't know much about telescopes, this is not a product that I would purchase and it's not a product I would recommend to people looking to get into astronomy and astrophotography. Coming into this review, I imagined the Night Sky MiniScope as a tool that would let me get impressive photos of the Moon, stars, and planets, but as it turns out, a lot of the photos that it captures aren't that compelling. Pictures of the Moon turn out nicely with a stable tripod or a lot of trial and error, but other planets and celestial bodies are just too small to capture with the Night Sky MiniScope. With its advertised "500x" zoom feature in use, anything in the sky just looks like a giant blur. A tiny, unstable tripod also made the process of attempting to capture photos more frustrating than fun. It can be used during the day, but dealing with the inadequate tripod and the tough-to-turn focus ring on the lens is almost more trouble than it's worth. The Night Sky MiniScope is a niche accessory that's only going to appeal to a limited audience due to its high price tag and its capabilities. People already familiar with telescopes will be able to look at its specs and the images in my review to determine its quality, and people not familiar with telescopes should do a lot of research before deciding to purchase the MiniScope. It's neat to play with, but ultimately, it's impractical and I'm not sure it has value as a serious tool. Pros: Unique concept Nice packaging, high quality materials in telescope Cons: Overpriced Tripod is useless Focus ring is difficult to turn 500x zoom is not useful App crashes Hard to use, hard to focus Can't see much besides the moon How to Buy The Night Sky MiniScope can be purchased from the iCandi iApps website for \$349. Note: MacRumors received no compensation for this review. Update: The Night Sky MiniScope team has written a few words as a response to my review, which I've added to the comments below and which can be found here. Going forward, future versions of the MiniScope will ship with an improved telescopic tripod and the app crashing issues will be fixed.

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