

The World's Largest Virtual Solar System Drive

A scaled model 38 million times smaller than outer space!

The Sun is the closest star to Earth. The ancient Romans named the Sun 'Sol' after their god of the sun. It is by far the largest object in our Solar System. The International Astronomical Union has designated that 8 planets orbit the Sun (as do many other objects).

For 76 years, Pluto was considered to be the 9th planet of our Solar System. However, after years of intense debate and controversy, in August 2006, the IAU reclassified Pluto as a dwarf planet.

At the scale of our Solar System model (1:38,000,000) the Sun would be the same size as the nearby dome of the Anglo Australian Observatory which houses the giant 3.9 metre mirror Anglo Australian Telescope.

Coonabarabran, the 'Astronomy Capital of Australia' is home to Australia's largest astronomy research facility. Maps and guides are available to assist your journey through the Solar System from Visitor Information Centre's along the 5 tourist drives and from the Exploratory Centre right here at Siding Spring Observatory.

THE SUN



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MERCURY

Mercury was named by the Greeks after the fleet footed messenger of the gods because this 'wandering star' (the meaning of the Greek word 'planet') moved so quickly through the sky. Mercury is a small, rocky and heavily cratered world. Why? During the early history of the Solar System, the Sun's gravity drew smaller objects in towards it. Which planet is nearest to the target? Mercury! Although closest to the Sun, Mercury is not the hottest planet. With virtually no atmosphere to warm it, the dark side of Mercury is one of the coldest places in the Solar System with night-time temperatures dropping to minus 173° Celsius! Mercury has no moons.

THE SUN
Soling Spring
Observatory



MERCURY

VENUS

EARTH

MARS

JUPITER

SATURN

URANUS

NEPTUNE

PLUTO



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Continuation

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VENUS

Named after the Roman goddess of love, Venus is most often mistaken for a star or a UFO! When seen just before sunrise we call it the 'morning star' and again the 'evening star' when observed just after sunset. On Venus, the Sun rises in the west and sets in the east! Because it orbits close to the Sun, the Earth's atmosphere causes Venus' colour and light to fluctuate leading to frequent reported UFO sightings. Venus is the hottest planet. Its thick atmosphere exerts 90 times more pressure than Earth's - trapping heat which increases the surface temperature to over 475° Celsius! It also rains sulphuric acid on Venus - the 'goddess of love' indeed! Venus has no moons.

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EARTH

Our home planet is the 3rd closest planet to the Sun and the 5th largest. Perhaps a better name for our planet would be 'Water' since nearly 71% of the Earth's surface is covered by water. Earth is the only planet name that does not derive from Greek or Roman mythology-the name coming from Germanic and Old English origin. Like the rest of the Solar System, Earth is about 4.55 billion years old but it occupies a special region of space where the temperature allows liquid water to exist. Earth has 1 moon and the gravitational interaction between Earth and the Moon slows the Earth's rotation by about 2 milliseconds per day every century.



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MARS

Mars, the 4th planet from the Sun and the 7th largest was named in honour of the Roman god of war because the planet appeared to be blood red. Although much smaller than Earth, Mars has roughly the same land surface and features which dwarf Earth's terrain. The Martian mountain Olympus Mons is 2.8 times higher than Mount Everest and the Martian canyon Valles Marineris (Mariner Valley) would span the width of Australia! Mars has 2 moons that are named after the horses that pulled the god of war's chariot - Phobos (Terror) and Deimos (Panic).

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MERCURY

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Constellation

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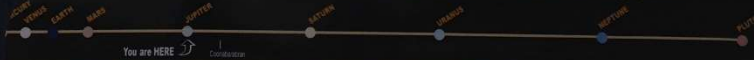
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JUPITER

The planet in our Solar System is named after the King of the Roman gods. This 'gas giant' does not have a solid surface, being about 90% hydrogen and 10% helium with traces of methane, water and ammonia. It takes only 9 hours 55 minutes to complete a 360° rotation on Jupiter's axis. The 'Great Red Spot', an enormous anti-cyclonic storm (similar to a hurricane) has persisted for over 400 years. Jupiter has at least 63 moons and a faint ring system!





JUPITER

The largest planet in our Solar System is named after the King of the Roman gods. This 'gas giant' does not have a solid surface, being about 90% hydrogen and 10% helium with traces of methane, water and ammonia. It takes only 9 hours 55 minutes to complete a 360° rotation on Jupiter's axis. The 'Great Red Spot', an enormous anti-cyclonic storm (similar to a hurricane) has persisted for over 400 years. Jupiter has at least 63 moons and a faint ring system!





SATURN

In Roman mythology, Saturn was the god of agriculture. A 'gas giant' comprising about 75% hydrogen and 25% helium, Saturn is the least dense of the planets. If you could find a bowl of water large enough, Saturn would float! It was first observed with a telescope in 1610 by Galileo. The rings are made up of millions of pieces of ice and rock. The gap in the rings, 'Cassini's Division' was discovered in 1675 by Italian born French astronomer Giovanni Cassini. Saturn has 34 named moons.



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URANUS

Uranus, the 3rd largest planet, is named after the Greek's earliest supreme god, the father of Saturn. Unlike most planets which orbit the Sun like spinning tops, Uranus's axis is tilted over at 97.9 degrees, causing it to roll around the Sun in its 84 year orbital period like a barrel! The seasonal changes through out the Uranian year are very dramatic because of the extreme tilt. Uranus is a 'gas giant' with atmosphere 83% hydrogen, 15% helium and 2% methane. A very faint and dark ring system was discovered in 1977. Uranus has at least 27 moons.



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NEPTUNE

Neptune, named after the Roman god of the sea, was observed by Galileo in 1613 but mistakenly thought to be a star. It was the first planet to be discovered as the result of mathematical calculations. The planet Uranus was heading 'off course'. Could it be the gravitational tug of another large planet? An English and a French astronomer calculated where that mysterious planet could be found - but nobody bothered to look! In 1846 a German astronomer did - and discovered Neptune. The fastest winds in the Solar System, at 1500 km per hour, are found on Neptune. Its largest moon Triton, orbits in the opposite direction to all other planets' moons, and it rotates on its axis in the opposite direction to Neptune's rotation. With a temperature of minus 233° Celsius, Triton is also the coldest place in the Solar System. Neptune has a faint ring system.

THE SUN
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Observatory



MERCURY

VENUS

EARTH

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Circulation

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HORSES & DOGS
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PLUTO

Discovered in 1930 by an American astronomer, Pluto was named after the Roman god of the underworld by an 11 year old English schoolgirl. Formerly accepted as the most distant planet from the Sun, tiny Pluto actually cuts inside Neptune's path for 20 years of its 248-year orbit. This next occurs in September 2226. Pluto, a rocky icy object, is smaller than Earth's Moon and it would fit between Perth and Sydney. In recent years more distant objects larger than Pluto have been discovered orbiting the Sun in the so called Kuiper Belt. Pluto was reclassified as a dwarf planet in August 2006, and is now considered to be a member of the Kuiper Belt.



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