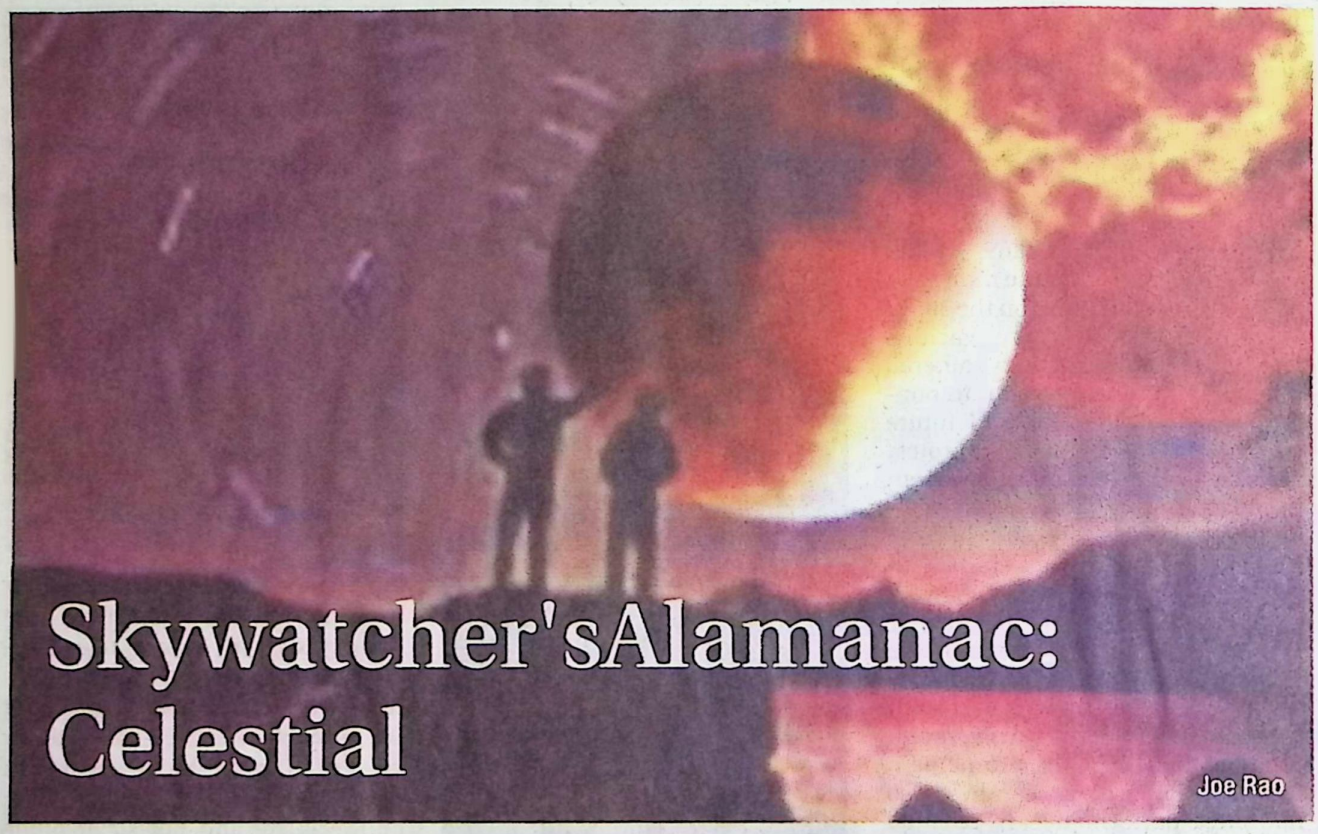


Skywatcher'sAlamanac: Celestial

Joe Rao

FROM a potentially spectacular summer meteor shower to a pair of lunar eclipses and compelling appearances of the planets, this year will be an excellent one for skywatching.

This astronomical almanac of sorts can serve as a planning guide. Specific events will be discussed in greater detail just prior to their occurrences.

THE PLANETS

Mercury will have two very good evening apparitions for Northern Hemisphere observers in 2007. The better of the two comes during late January into the first half of February when Mercury will be evident as a bright yellowish-orange "star" low in the west-southwest sky, to the lower right of brilliant Venus. Mercury will arrive at its greatest elongation, 18-degrees to the east of the Sun on Feb. 9. The other good evening apparition comes during the last half of May into the first week of June, when it will shine low in the west-northwest from one and a half to 2 hours after sundown.

For early risers, Mercury will put on an excellent showing through much of November, being readily visible in the east-southeast sky for up to 90 minutes before sunrise. In fact, from Nov. 5 through the 12th, Mercury will rise in a completely dark sky before the start of morning twilight.

A moderately good morning apparition of Mercury stretches from mid July into the opening days of August, with this rocky little world glowing through the midsummer dawn twilight near to the east-northeast horizon up to 90 minutes before sunrise.

Venus will have a spectacular 2007, as explained in our previous Venus Viewer's Guide. It will be a brilliant evening object from now through the start of August, dominating the western evening sky. It will then transition into the morning sky, becoming a very prominent object in the eastern sky from the final days of August on through the balance of the year.

Mars is currently a morning object, teamed with Jupiter and the bright red star Antares, but from now through the end of April it will be rising only minutes before the start of morning twilight. It's rather unimpressive during this interval, but beginning in May it starts a very slow climb up into the eastern sky and gradually brightens as it approaches the Earth. Toward the end of August it's rising around midnight (local daylight time). By the start of October it will shine as bright as a zero-magnitude star and by the second week of December, it will have swelled in brilliance to rival even Sirius, the brightest of all the stars. Mars is nearest to Earth on December 18th at a distance of 54.8 million miles (88.2 million kilometers) and is at opposition on Christmas Eve when it rises near sunset, peaks high in the south about midnight and sets near sunrise.