Gliese 581b and d (there is no "a", to avoid confusion with the star itself). The Earth-like planet orbits its sun at a distance of only six million miles or so (our Sun is 93 million miles away), travelling so fast that its "year" only lasts 13 of our days.

The parent star would dominate the view from the surface - a huge red ball of fire that must be a spectacular sight. It is difficult to speculate what - if any - life there is on the planet. If there is life there it would have to cope with the higher gravity and solar radiation from its sun.

Just because Gliese 581c is habitable does not mean that it is inhabited, but we do know its sun is an ancient star - in fact, it is one of the oldest stars in the galaxy, and extremely stable. If there is life, it has had many billions of years to evolve. This makes this planet a prime target in the search for life. According to Seth Shostak, of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence Institute in California, the Gliese system is now a prime target for a radio search. By 2020 at least one space telescope should be in orbit, with the capability of detecting signs of life on planets orbiting nearby stars. If oxygen or methane (tell-tale biological gases) are found in Gliese 581c's atmosphere, this would be good circumstantial evidence for life. Dr Malcolm Fridlund, a European Space Agency scientist, said the discovery of Gliese 581c was "an important step" on the road to finding life.

"If this is a rocky planet, it's very likely it will have liquid water on its surface, which means there may also be life." The real importance is not so much the discovery of this planet itself, but the fact that it shows that Earth-like planets are probably extremely common in the Universe. There are 200 billion stars in our galaxy alone and many astronomers believe most of these stars have planets. The fact that almost as soon as we have built a telescope capable of detecting small, earth-like worlds, one turns up right on our cosmic doorstep, shows that statistically, there are probably billions of earths out there.

As Seth Shostak says: "We've never found one close to being like the Earth until now. We are finding that Earth is not such an unusual puppy in the litter of planets." But are these alien Earths home to life? No one knows. We don't understand how life began on our world, let alone how it could arise anywhere else. There may be an awful lot of bugs and bacteria out there, and only a few worlds with what we would recognise as plants and animals. Or, of course, there may be nothing. The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence Institute uses radio telescopes to try to pick up messages sent by alien civilisations. Interestingly, Gliese 581c is so close to the Earth that if its putative inhabitants only had our level of technology, they could - just about - pick up some of our radio signals, such as the most powerful military transmitters. Quite what would happen if we for our part did receive a signal is unclear. William Hill said it had shortened the odds on proving the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence from 1,000-1 to 100-1. The new planet, so far unnamed, is 20.5 light years away and orbits a red dwarf star called Gliese 581.

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