



GIMME SHELTER

For the suburban stargazer cramped for space and dodging various sources of neighbourhood outdoor lighting, a small domed observatory can be the ideal setup. Gaining height from a deck, the author found the SkyShed POD's rotating dome acted as a cozy enclosure and windbreak for his pier-mounted 12-inch Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope. The dome turns easily by hand on two dozen wheels. Access is via door at lower left in this view.

New personal observatory

A moderately priced domed observatory for your backyard
—made in Canada!

ABOUT ONCE EVERY DECADE, AN astronomy innovation emerges that changes the hobby for thousands of enthusiasts. Dobsonian telescopes, Schmidt-Cassegrain telescopes, GoTo telescopes, the Telrad finder and Nagler eyepieces all come to mind. Now this year, another invention is set to change the way (and how often) people observe. It's the SkyShed POD (Personal Observing Dome).

Veteran observers often say that the best

accessory you can get for your telescope is an observatory. That way, you can use your telescope at short notice and not have to spend time setting it up or taking it down (the taking down at the end of a cold winter observing session can be one of the few really unpleasant tasks in telescope astronomy). But for many people, the dream of a backyard observatory remains just that. They don't have the time or skills to build their own observatory. The SkyShed POD

is an affordable, easy-to-assemble backyard observatory that promises to change all that.

Wayne Parker, the Canadian inventor of the POD and owner of SkyShed, broke onto the astronomy-equipment scene early this decade at a Starfest convention when he introduced his SkyShed roll-off-roof observatories, available as plans, kits or complete turnkey installations. Last year, he arrived with the wall sections of his prototype for the SkyShed POD (the dome was still in development). The promise of a reasonably priced domed observatory generated a great deal of interest. All last winter, the excitement among astronomy enthusiasts mounted as the production—and the hype—moved forward. Parker announced that he would select a number of "beta" testers who would get a free POD in exchange for testing one and providing feedback. He received about 4,000 requests from would-be beta testers! Last February, I took possession of the first beta POD.

The POD is made of sturdy double-walled polypropylene plastic, the same plastic used for outdoor furniture and kids' play equipment. The standard POD arrives in four boxes and is assembled from 10 pieces: five wall sections, one door section (same size as a wall section) and four sections for the dome. The kit includes all the hardware you need to assemble the POD and an instructional DVD. It can be set up on level ground or, preferably, a deck. I already had a deck with a pier through it, so for me, the decision was easy.

The first step is to assemble the wall sections by linking them together via a peg-and-hole system at the bottom and a nut and bolt at the top. The wheels are

IT'S ABOUT SPACE

Demonstrating one of the optional POD bays (30 inches wide and 23 inches deep), SkyShed designer and company owner Wayne Parker of Staffa, Ontario, has been an astronomy enthusiast since childhood. A musician by profession, Parker is bass player for the Juno Award-winning pop rock group Glass Tiger. Further details about the SkyShed POD: www.skyshedpod.com



IF YOU BUILD IT...

Modular for easy assembly, the SkyShed POD is also robust enough for semi-permanent installation. Many modern telescopes, especially those used for astrophotography, have enough accessories to make setup and takedown a tedious affair. With an observatory, the instrument stays mounted and polar-aligned indefinitely.



OPEN THE POD BAY DOORS, HAL...

DOMESWEET DOME

An observatory that looks like a mini Mount Palomar is perhaps the ultimate telescope accessory. The SkyShed POD is even available in a variety of colours.



ROLL YOUR OWN DOME Various views of the SkyShed POD show the interior, rotation-wheel arrangement and interlocking assembly system. For astronomy enthusiasts who don't have the time, tools or skills to build an observatory from scratch, the POD is an attractive alternative. The dome is made of double-walled plastic, the same material used for outdoor furniture. A standard POD is shipped in four boxes, ready for assembly.

installed at the top of the wall sections. The dome is assembled from two halves. Flange plates bolt onto the primary dome to improve the ease of rotation. The primary dome is lifted onto the assembled walls (this should be done with a helper) and secured using supplied brackets with wheels that hold the dome to the walls but still allow it to rotate freely. The secondary dome is then lifted onto the walls (again with a helper) and bolted to the primary dome with two large carriage bolts that act as the pivot point for opening and closing the dome. The dome can be rotated only when the secondary dome is in the up position (blocks in the secondary dome and notches in the walls allow the dome to be locked down when closed).

The POD is a dream to use. It is surprisingly roomy inside, even for someone six-foot-seven, like me. I have a 12-inch

Schmidt-Cassegrain telescope, and there is plenty of room for a small table and a couple of observers. Now I am ready to observe in only a few minutes and can close up just as quickly. For astronomers who have additional equipment or need extra storage, the POD can be ordered with bays. Available with optional sliding shelves, the bays can replace any wall section, so many configurations are possible. You could set up a computer in one bay and store eyepieces and accessories in another. The POD comes in a variety of colours, including two glow-in-the-dark shades. Priced at about \$1,650 for a complete, easily assembled observatory, the SkyShed POD is set to change the hobby for the 21st century. ■

Steve Barnes is a longtime backyard astronomer and astrophotographer. He operates Sky Optics in Burlington, Ontario.