# European Southern Observatory

## Europe to the Stars

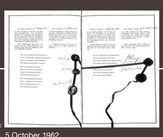
## — ESO's First 50 Years of Exploring the Southern Sky

The year 2012 marks the 50th anniversary of the European Southern Observatory (ESO), the foremost intergovernmental astronomy organisation in the world. This very special year provides a great opportunity to look back at ESO's history, as it celebrates 50 years of reaching new heights in astronomy.

The signing of the ESO Convention in 1962 and the creation of ESO was the culmination of the dream of leading astronomers from five European countries, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden: a joint European observatory to be built in the southern hemisphere to give astronomers from Europe access to the magnificent and rich southern sky by the means of a large telescope.

The dream resulted in the creation of the La Silla Observatory in Chile, and eventually led to the construction and operation of a fleet of telescopes, with the 3.6-metre telescope as flagship. In the 1980s the New Technology Telescope brought further pioneering advances such as active optics. This prepared the way for the next step: the construction of the world's most advanced visible-light astronomical observatory, the Very Large Telescope at Cerro Paranal.

1 21 June 1953
A shared European observatory is discussed for the first time by a group of astronomers at Leiden in the Netherlands.



2 5 October 1962
Founding members Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden sign the ESO Convention.

3 7 November 1963
Chile is chosen as the site for the ESO observatory and the *Convenio* (also known as the *Acuerdo*), the agreement between Chile and ESO, is signed.

4 26 May 1964
The ESO Council selects the mountain Cinchado Nord — later to become La Silla — as the site of its observatory.

5 30 October 1964
Acquisition of La Silla Mountain and land for the Chilean headquarters in Vitacura.

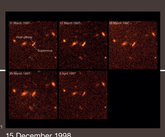
20 25 May 1998
First light for the VLT's first Unit Telescope (UT1), Antu.

19 4 December 1990
Paranal is selected by ESO as the site for the VLT.

18 23 March 1989
First light of the New Technology Telescope (NTT).

6 October 1988
The Chilean Government donates the land around Cerro Paranal to ESO.

7 8 December 1987
Decision is taken by the ESO Council to build the Very Large Telescope (VLT).



21 15 December 1998
Observations of exploding stars, made with telescopes including ones at La Silla, show that the expansion of the Universe is accelerating. The 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded for this result.

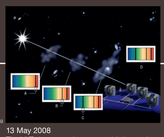
22 5 March 1999
Official inauguration of Paranal Observatory.

23 17 March 2001
First light for the Very Large Telescope Interferometer (VLTI).

24 5 April 2001
ESO signs an agreement with representatives from North America to build ALMA on the Chajnantor Plateau (Japan joined in 2004).

25 7 May 2001
Portugal formally joins ESO (Member State 9).

40 16 November 2008
VLT and APEX studies of violent flares from the centre of the Milky Way reveal material being stretched out as it orbits in the intense gravity close to the central supermassive black hole.



39 13 May 2008
The VLT detects carbon monoxide in a galaxy seen as it was almost 11 billion years ago, allowing the most precise measurement of the cosmic temperature at such a remote epoch.

38 30 April 2007
The Czech Republic formally joins ESO (Member State 13).

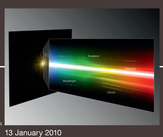
37 14 February 2007
Spain formally joins ESO (Member State 12)

36 11 December 2006
The ESO Council agrees to proceed with studies for the European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT).

41 10 December 2008
ESO's flagship telescopes were used in a 16-year-long study to obtain the most detailed view of the surroundings of the supermassive black hole at the heart of our galaxy.

42 1 July 2009
Austria formally joins ESO (Member State 14).

43 11 December 2009
VISTA, the pioneering new survey telescope, starts work.



44 13 January 2010
The first direct spectrum of an exoplanet is observed with the VLT.

45 26 April 2010
Cerro Armazones is chosen as the site for the E-ELT.

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