

Cheap Observer's Report Scoring the Deals off the Internet

By Alex McConahay

I recently asked in the Astromart Forums for suggestions about how to save money in astronomy. Right near the top of the suggestions was "Get your stuff off Astromart."

If you want to save money on equipment, then you have to get to know Astromart. This website is one of several markets for used astro equipment. You can find it at <http://www.astromart.com/> And once you have registered and click in you will be presented with six tabs-

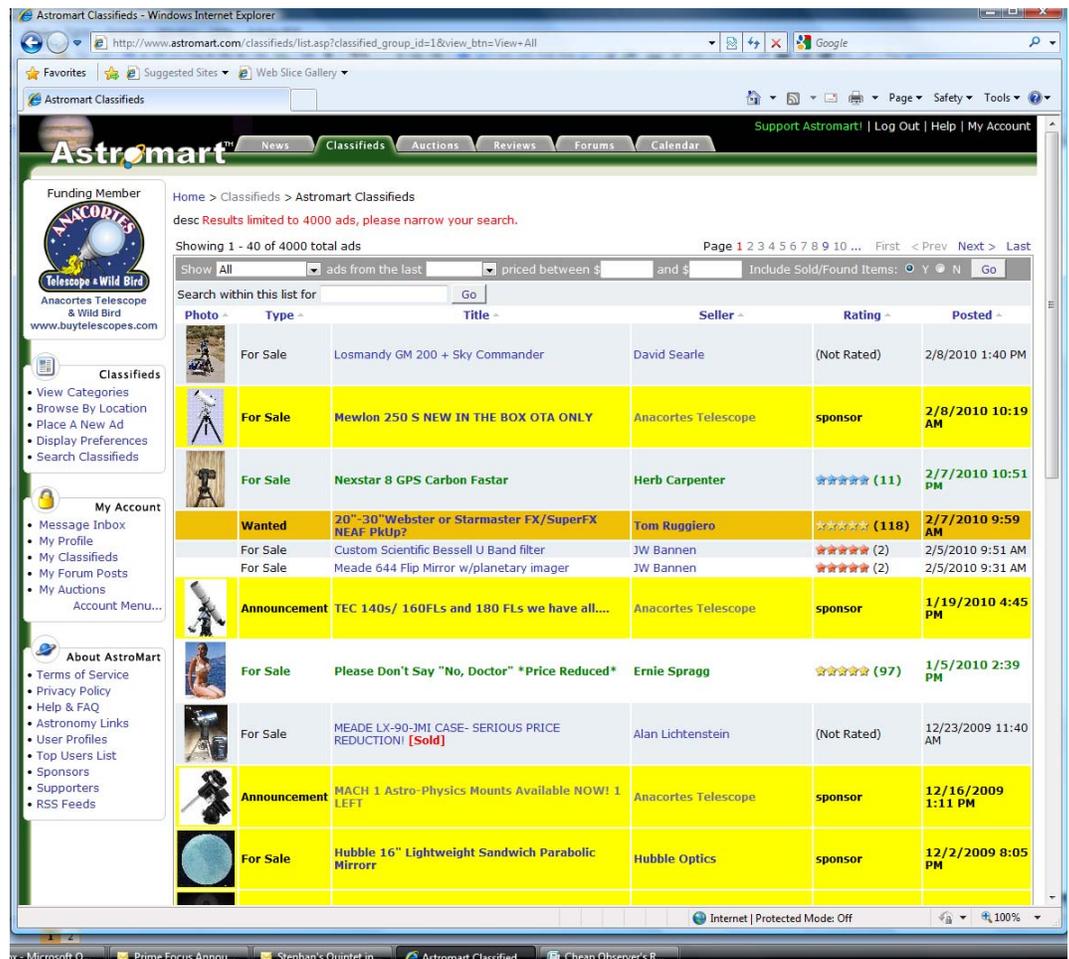
- **News:** what is happening in astronomy or space exploration,
- **Calendar:** events in the astro-hobby world *And—more importantly to the Cheap Observer.*
- **Reviews:** impressions of equipment written generally by members.
- **Forums:** A collection of discussions about various aspects of the hobby.
- **Classifieds and Auctions:** Places to buy and sell your stuff!!!!

While the *news* and *calendar* may be interesting to some, I find other sources for that information more useful.

The *Reviews*, however, can help a Cheap Observer make decisions about whether equipment is worthwhile or not. Of course, it is wise to read these reviews

with your eyes wide open. They are often written by the enthusiastic rather than the experienced. Consider that many of us will want to share what we just found out about, say, our new mount. But relatively few of us have spent significant time with five different mounts in that class. So, a review will emphasize what somebody has discovered about a piece of equipment, but maybe not so much about alternative equipment. Still, these impressions are better than nothing.

The *Forums* are also a source of advice for those buying and selling equipment (or a whole lot of other things related to the hobby). You can get (often contradictory) opinions from





Above: Mark Melnyk, RAS Star Party Director, displaying hunting trophy (A QHY-8 camera) from a mid-winter expedition to Astromart. He saw the camera offered for \$300 off list price, offered \$100 less, and walked away with a virtually brand new camera.

many people about the value of some piece of equipment or another. But if it is wise to keep your eyes open in the Reviews, it is absolutely critical that you read the Forums with caution. Too many of the opinions expressed there are simply opinions or rehashes of somebody else's opinion. You have to learn how to read them.

Forums also suffer from a sampling effect. People don't write in to talk about how well their camera worked last night. But let something go wrong, and there will be a post. And the post will be answered by a few people who had the same problem. Then the snowball rolls down the hill. The impression is that the camera (and software) is really not very good. But, again, you are not hearing from all the people who are working it quite successfully.

But the real value of Astromart is in the Classified section. Here are thousands of ads for nearly everything in the hobby (and some things outside the hobby). The 27 categories

of *Astro things* contain more than 4000 ads. (and 35 for *non-astro* have an additional 180). The related Auctions section is much smaller, but allows you to name your own price (well, as long as you can name one slightly higher than anybody else who wants that item).

Even if you don't want to buy used, perusing the ads will give you an idea of what is popular out there, what is selling, what isn't, the resale value of what you might be interested in, and such.

So, Astromart is a good market for buying and selling your equipment, a source for getting information about it, and for helping set the prices (if you are planning on selling it elsewhere).

Astromart's ease of use has led to the phenomenon of "renting" equipment. This term is used jokingly among the regular users for buying something, using it for a few months, and then selling it back on Astromart for about the same price they paid for it. For many this is the ideal way to try out equipment. It is yours, you can do what you want with it, and when tired of it you easily walk away.

On the other hand, if you are a frequent "renter," watch how you set your re-sale prices. It is considered tacky to "flip" an object. That is, if you find a great deal while bottom feeding, and immediately turn around and try to sell it for more, people will notice and call you on it. You have not done anything "wrong," but it is not in keeping with the Astromart spirit.

Some are reluctant to buy anything used and without warranty. But in this hobby, there is a lot to be said about buying used. Let's face it, astronomy equipment does not usually wear out. The people in the hobby generally take pretty good care of their stuff. Therefore, much of our equipment will continue to do well what

it originally did. Furthermore, if something is "wrong" (like a scratch on a lens, or a dented tube, or some bad pixels on a camera) it is usually pretty obvious. Furthermore, once something has been used for a bit, anything that is going to break under warranty has probably already broken and been repaired. So, warranties are not of much value after a while. With astronomy, what you see is what you get.

Buying used is also a little easier because in our hobby people are pretty honest. Few are out to make a quick killing, or sell something that won't work well. And, since we are all hobbyists, we tend to know each other. True, on the national stage you may not know the guy selling the scope personally, but we do have a lot in common. It is hard to be anonymous in the Astromart community.

Anonymity is difficult in Astromart. Not only are full regular names required (screen names not allowed!), but it has a "rating" system. The system tells how many deals that person has completed, which tells a lot about his or her trustworthiness. The ratings have some defects. For instance, you cannot rate somebody if you have not completed a deal with him or her. This means a person reneging on a deal cannot be downrated. And the "default" rating is a perfect 5. So, as far as I can tell, all transactions are rated a 5.

The Forums offer another place for people to spout off if they think something is fishy. It happens every couple of months that somebody writes in to point out an ad that does not seem kosher. A whole community is monitoring the Forums.

And then there is Herb. You see, Herb is judge and jury. And Executioner. The benevolent dictator of Astromart watches over his website to make sure nothing goes wrong. If he sniffs that anything in an ad is not proper, he simply elimi-

[Antiques ASTRO ONLY](#) (41 ads)
[Astrographs](#) (9 ads)
[Barlows](#) (54 ads)
[Binoculars](#) (91 ads)
[Binoviewers](#) (32 ads)
[Camera Lenses](#) (79 ads)
[Cameras \(FILM\)](#) (44 ads)
[Cases](#) (43 ads)
[CCD Cameras ASTRO](#) (324 ads)
[Diagonals](#) (62 ads)
[Digital Cameras NON ASTRO](#) (66 ads)
[Eyepieces](#) (660 ads)
[Filters, Finders, Guide Scopes](#) (255 ads)
[Focusers](#) (104 ads)
[Meteorites](#) (13 ads)
[Mounts, Drives, Tripods](#) (642 ads)
[NightVision](#) (1 ads)
[Observatories](#) (36 ads)
[Range Finders](#) (0 ads)
[Solar Filters](#) (34 ads)
[Software & Publications \(ASTRO\)](#) (138 ads)
[Spotting Scopes](#) (11 ads)
[Telescope Making](#) (89 ads)
[Telescope - Reflectors](#) (220 ads)
[Telescope - Catadioptric](#) (315 ads)
[Telescope - Refractor](#) (344 ads)
[Misc & Other Astronomy](#) (451 ads)

Above, what's for sale on Astromart.

nates that ad, and the account, and for all we know, the person placing the ad. (Since we never hear from him or her again, we really don't know what happens. Summary execution.) Herb also owns Anacortes Telescopes, a large purveyor of astronomical equipment in Washington State.

For the past couple of years, Astromart has charged a one time \$12.00 for registration. This helps keep scammers out, since few of them want to take the time or spend the money to register. Placing or answering an ad is otherwise free. Astromart takes no cut of any transaction between the buyer and seller.

But it is not nice to freeload. Therefore, Astromart solicits supporters and offers extra-charge enhancements for their ads.

Astromart lets one offer items for specific prices, or best offers, specify the types of payments (Paypal, credit card, cash...) and shipment (pick-up only, buyer pays...) When one replies to an ad, the transaction immediately goes through one's own email system, and not through Astromart.

My general rule of thumb is that things sell used on Astromart for about 60 to 80 per cent of what one would pay for the item new. Be aware that by the time you have seen the ad, there is a good chance that somebody else has already snapped up the real bargains. Pricing has a lot to do with the original quality of the item (Real quality sells for 90 per cent and more of the original price.), and how much electronics it has in it (the more electronics the more it has a chance to be made obsolete by newer electronics.) You should feel free to make an offer. And when pricing your stuff for sale, remember that shipping can be costly (and time consuming)!

There are competitors. EBay is, of course, a huge site for buying and selling everything. As I write this, there are 5198 hits for *Telescope*. Of course, only two of the first forty are for better than "department store" scopes. And the prices on Naglers ap-

pear to be retail, or close to with a few (but significant) exceptions. If you know what you are doing, EBay can be a good place to go hunting.

Cloudy Nights <http://www.cloudynights.com/> offers the same news, reviews, calendars, and Forum. CN's Forums are much busier than Astromart, but the classifieds have one fourth the traffic. In the last two weeks, Cloudy Nights reports about 420 ads to Astromart's 1607.

So, go to Astromart and see what they have to offer. You will get some opinions, and you may find just what you are looking for in the classifieds. You may even may make some cash moving stuff from your junkpile to somebody else's. It's an easy way to get access to astronomical equipment for the Cheap Observer.

Happy Hunting.

Below, a recent ad for my ST-4 autoguider, which I had bought (off Astromart) eight or ten years ago for \$450. Note the ad includes details about the items, price, and pictures. It is important to specify what is included and condition of items. Although placing the ad could be free (and I paid nothing to Astromart after the sale), I always pay for special ad placement, or pay a supporters fee when I am selling something. Within hours after placing this ad, a fellow from Orange County offered me \$350 for the camera, and we met later the next night to complete the deal.

For Sale: ST-4 Autoguider [SOLD]

Ad No.: 664807
 Seller: Alex McConahay ★★★★★ (47)
 Price: \$400.00
 S & H: Seller pays shipping
 Posted: 1/14/2010 10:12 AM
 Location: Moreno Valley, CA - United States
 Ad Hits: 672

SBIG ST-4 Stand Alone Autoguider

This autoguider provides excellent guiding without a laptop on a field-remote 12 volt power supply (or 120 volt AC). It can also be used (with appropriate computer control and cables) as a monochrome imager, but was made famous by its autoguiding. It includes:

- Cooled CCD Head
- Control Box
- Cables to Head, to Autoguider input on mount, and power.
- 12 volt 850ma AC to DC power supply

From the SBIG Website :
Very few instruments have had the dramatic effect on astrophotography as the Model ST-4 CCD Imaging Camera/Autoguider. This thermoelectrically cooled CCD imaging camera is actually a dual purpose instrument that can be used as an automatic Star Tracker to take long guided exposures of the night sky or, in conjunction with a personal computer, as an introductory level Imaging Camera displaying 8 bit digital images. The internal cooling of the CCD reduces the detector thermal noise and significantly improves the ability to guide on dim stars. The ST-4 is easy to use and will automatically track a guide star for professional quality astrophotographs, measure stellar magnitude, perform as a blink comparator or record images of galaxies.