

I don't know about you, but once the fire dies down to a few glowering coals and I look up into the cool night sky, my eyes are always drawn to my favourite constellation, the Southern Cross.

Once I've found it, it makes me feel, well, comforted. The familiar pattern these five stars create is adorned on our nation's flag, and it makes us feel home. It's a group of stars we've come to cherish, a group that identifies us as citizens of the Great Southern Land.

But what about those two stars – the 'Pointers' – always hanging off to the left of the Southern Cross? In this post, I'll take you through a few interesting campfire facts about the whole group.

Not Always the Southern Cross!

The constellation we commonly call The Southern Cross was named 'CruX' (or, 'Cross') by the Ancient Greeks.

Yes, the Greeks spotted the group of stars, even though Europe sits well north of the equator! Interestingly, they cannot see the constellation anymore. The gradual wobble of the earth's rotational axis has caused the Southern Cross to dip below Europe's southern horizon over a period of thousands of years. You'd need to be south of the 25deg North Latitude (approximately Northern Africa) to glimpse it these days.

Which Way's South?

If you need to get your bearings from the Southern Cross, first let me ask: what are you doing outside, in the dark, without a compass?

Assuming your answer is legit, let me give you the really simple method. Draw a line between the 'top' star and the 'bottom' star of the cross. That line points South, basically. Not exactly south, but, dammit, southerly.

Depending on where you are in the world, what time of the year it is, and how lost you are, knowing whether you are south-bound or north-bound is a good place to start.

For the navigational purists out there, I'll go ahead and give you the exact way to figure it out:

"Extend the line of the Cross's vertical axis towards the horizon, such that it intersects a line perpendicular to, and bisecting of, a line running between the Pointer stars. This intersection is the South Celestial Pole, from which the line running vertically to the horizon will represent a bearing directly south of the observer."

Phew. Said it. Now, get a compass, and try not to break it this time... or invest in a GPS, I mean, seriously...

The Pointers

I actually think the 'Pointers' are a bit more interesting than the Cross itself.

These two stars are part of the constellation of Centaurus. They make up the front 2 legs (or feet) of a half-man, half horse shaped constellation. The Pointer star furthest away from the cross is Alpha Centauri. This is one of the closest stars to our own Sun (4.5 light years). It's



actually a double-star (or ‘binary’) system, consisting of two stars orbiting around a common point. Due to distance, they appear as a single bright star, (in fact, the third-brightest in the night sky).

The really interesting star you can’t see is Proxima Centauri, which is the closest star to our sun (roughly 4.26 light years). It’s too dim to see with the naked eye. But it’s up there, hanging off the Alpha Centauri binary stars like a third wheel...

For those of you who don’t understand what a ‘light year’ is, don’t worry. I prefer to think of it in science fiction terms, where 1 light-year is a bit like a ‘trip down the shops’ for Captain Kirk. Whereas 4.5 light years is a bit further (ie, you’d want to get changed out of those Ugg Boots) and 50 light-years is officially a ‘road trip’.

Time for Bed

OK, that’s enough astronomy for now. I hope you’ve enjoyed a few fun facts about the night sky, and perhaps you’ve learnt a thing or two so you can impress your buddies with your astro-knowledge next time you’re gazing up at the Milky Way. Finish off your hot Milo, it’s time to hit the sack.

Oh – and don’t forget to put that fire out.

Need a compass for stargazing? Check out our range [here](#).