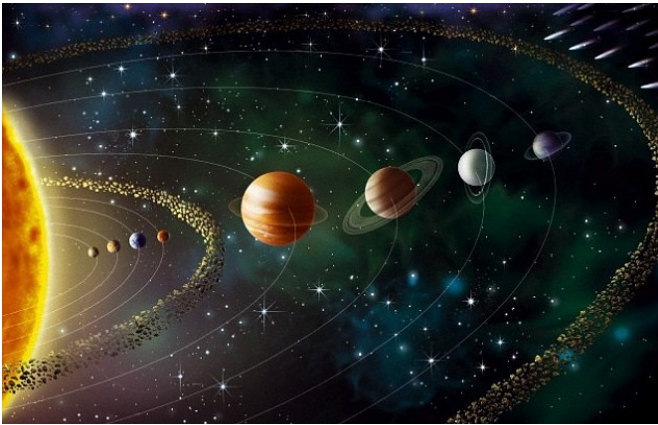


OUR SOLAR SYSTEM



Let's leave our planet, the Earth, and explore the solar system together!

Everything in the solar system is centered around the sun. The sun is a star, like many others we can see in the night sky. It is many times closer to us than the other stars, but it's still very far away: about 93 million miles from the Earth. It looks very small but it is the biggest

object in the solar system. It's so big that it is one hundred times wider than the Earth.

The sun is what holds the solar system together: it's massive gravity keeps the Earth, and all the other planets circling around it. Moreover the sun allows us to live on Earth: without the sun there would be no heat, there would be no light, plants could not grow, water would freeze and nothing could survive. The sun gives us heat and light, because it is always burning: it is a giant ball of gas, mostly hydrogen and helium and it burns at millions of degrees in its centre.

Mercury

Mercury is the closest planet to the sun and it's the smallest planet in the solar system. It's one of the five planets you can see from the Earth using just your eyes! Mercury is very similar to our moon: it is small and has a rocky surface with craters on it. It hasn't got any moons and any air to breath. Temperatures are boiling hot in the sun and freezing cold in the shade. It is the fastest planet to go around the sun: it only takes 88 days.

Venus

Someone call Venus "Earth sister" because they are very close in size and gravity, but they are very different on the surface. Venus is the hottest planet in the solar system because the carbon dioxide in its thick atmosphere helps it to trap the heat. Venus is very beautiful to look at: it is the second brightest object in the night sky, the only thing brighter is the moon. It looks like a very bright star at sunrise or sunset.

Earth

It is the third planet from the sun. It's not too hot and not too cold: it is just right to live on! As far as we know, Earth is the only planet to have living things.

Mars

It's the fourth planet from the sun. Mars is know as "the red planet" because of the iron oxide in the soil gives it a reddish colour. Mars is smaller than Venus and the Earth; it is cold and rocky with a thin atmosphere made of carbon

dyoxide and oxygen. There is water ice on Mars and scientists believe that people could live there with the help of some special equipment. Rockets and probes have already been sent there to gain more information about the planet. At the moment there two robots exploring the surface of Mars and sending information back to the Earth. Mars has got two moons, they are small and irregular.

Asteroid belt

It's a big ring of asteroids or rocky objects orbiting the sun between Mars and Jupiter.

Jupiter

It's the largest planet in the solar system and it's called "a gas giant", because it is really big and made mostly of gases. It is also the third brightest object in the night sky, after the Moon and Venus. Jupiter has at least 67 moons but 55 of them are very small. Some of them are really large and at least two of them are about the same size as the planet Mercury. People cannot land on Jupiter, because it is made of gas and there is no ground to land on. It is covered by terrible storms and the biggest one is called "the great red spot".

Saturn

It's another gas giant and it's famous for its beautiful rings. They are made of many small ice particles, rocks and dust. Saturn has got more than sixty moons orbiting around it and some of them are very big. It's the farthest planet we can see from Earth without the help of a telescope.

Uranus

Uranus is the seventh planet from the sun and another gas giant. It's the only planet in the solar system which spins sideways. Uranus has rings around it and 27 moons. Uranus is covered in blue clouds made of methane which gives it its lovely colour.

Neptune

It is very similar to Uranus because it has methane in its atmosphere and it also looks blue. Neptune has a few thin rings and 14 moons that we know about. It is very far out in space and it takes a very long time to go around the sun: it takes more than 164 years to finish an orbit around the sun!

Pluto

Pluto was discovered in 1930 and was listed as the ninth planet on the solar system. In 2006, after 76 years from his discovery, Pluto was declared a "dwarf planet": it is similar to a planet, but much smaller. There are at least six dwarf planets in the solar system and possibly many more...

So there are eight official planets in the solar system: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune.