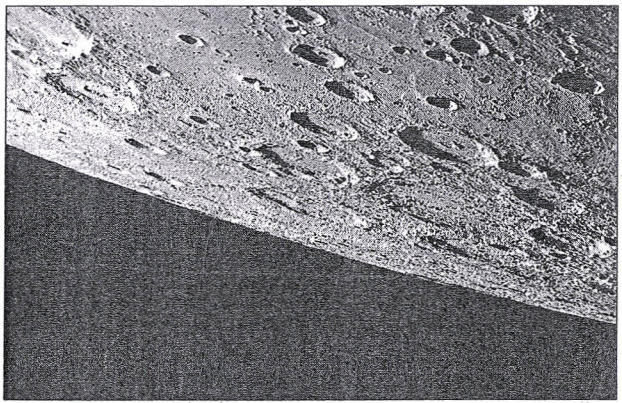
Today you can see Mercury

NASA craft enters planet's orbit for the first time



SPOT THE WEIRDEST PLANET AS IT PAIRS WITH JUPITER

Washington: Earth is about to get better acquainted with Mercury, a rocky wonderland of extremes. Sure, Mars may fascinate science fiction authors, Jupiter looms large and Saturn has stunning rings, but tiny Mercury can claim the title as weirdest planet in the solar system. It has the wildest extremes from hot to cold. A day on Mercury lasts longer than its year. And scientists think it holds tons of ice in dark craters despite being the planet closest to the Sun.

On St. Patrick's Day (March 17), for the first time, a small NASA spacecraft called Messenger will enter Mercury's orbit, circling at times as close as 125 miles from the planet's surface. Barely bigger than our moon but much more distant, Mercury is not easy to see without a telescope. However, an odd pairing with giant Jupiter will make it easier to spot it with the naked eye starting Sunday, said Geoff Chester at the US Naval Observatory in Washington.

Chester said people in the northern hemisphere should look to the west after sunset. Jupiter will be about 10 degrees above the western horizon. Mercury will be about finger's width to the right of Jupiter.

"Mercury has sometimes been called the forgotten planet," said Sean Solomon, the Carnegie Institution planetary geologist who is Messenger's chief scientist. "It is extreme in many respects. It is the smallest, closest to the Sun. It is made of the densest materials."

NASA's Mariner probe flew by Mercury in 1974 and 1975, and Messenger has whizzed by it in 2008 and 2009. But this is the first time a spacecraft will attempt the tricky manoeuvre of entering Mercury's orbit, circling it for a year. To do that, Messenger will have to thwart the enormous pull of the Sun. The overall heat on its sunny side will melt some parts of Messenger's instruments. These will act as a heat buffer for the more sensitive parts. Then the melted parts will refreeze when the spacecraft hits a cooler zone, said Messenger system engineering chief Eric Finnegan.

One myth about Mercury is that it's the hottest planet. Actually, that would be Venus. But Mercury has a tenuous atmosphere with wild swings in temperature. When parts of Mercury face the Sun, it can be 800 degrees. On the opposite side, it can be 300 degrees below zero, said mission scientist Ralph McNutt of Johns Hopkins University. Near Mercury's poles there are deep craters gouged by comets and asteroids that "never see any sunlight and haven't for maybe a billion years," McNutt said. AP

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