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Opening a large research facility to visitors: the case of Virgo

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Virgo, hosted at the European Gravitational Observatory (EGO) is one of the most important observatories and cutting-edge physics experiments in Europe, but it is also a popular “touristic” destination, visited every year by over 10.000 people.

Virgo is first and foremost an active laboratory, where more than one hundred scientists are at work every day to do frontier physics. How can it also be a place that people enjoy visiting? How can we make sure that they do so without disrupting research activities? This requires tackling problems of a different nature, from logistical organization to the development of a visit format adapted to different audiences.

How do we handle the organization of up to 100 visitors on site, moving through experimental areas and office buildings? How can we involve researchers, giving visitors the opportunity to hear of gravitational wave science through their voices?

How can we cater to different audiences, from elementary school students to PhD students to the general public? Where is the balance between offering an informative and educational visit, and making sure that people have fun? What changes can we implement to the spaces of the observatory to make the visit experience more interesting?

Welcoming visitors into the spaces where the magic of science happens is a manifestation of transparency, involvement and trust, that could help to build stronger relationships with society at every scale, from global to local.

Submitted on behalf of a Collaboration?

Yes

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