

Planet Jupiter

Jupiter, the fifth planet away from the Sun, is the largest planet in the solar system. Jupiter is about eleven times larger than Earth. NASA, the U.S. space agency, began sending spacecraft to explore Jupiter in 1972. These craft have taken pictures of Jupiter and onboard instruments have gathered scientific measurements and information about this huge planet.



Jupiter revolves around the Sun in a slightly elliptical (oval) orbit about 484 million miles from the Sun. This is five times further away from the Sun than Earth. It takes 4,333 days on Earth for Jupiter to make one revolution around the Sun so a year on Jupiter is nearly 12 years on Earth. Like other planets, Jupiter rotates on its axis but it rotates faster than any other planet. It rotates so fast that this giant planet takes only 9 hours and 56 minutes to complete one rotation. Days on Jupiter are about half the length of days on Earth.

Jupiter is a bright planet and appears brighter than many stars in the night sky when it is visible. Jupiter is quite different from other planets; scientists believe that Jupiter is a huge ball of gas and liquid. As far as scientists can determine, Jupiter may have only a small amount of solid surface. Instead, the surface is made up of red, brown, yellow and white clouds. Bands of light colored clouds are called zones and bands of dark colored clouds are called belts. Zones and belts encircle the planet.

One unusual formation on the surface of Jupiter is called the Great Red Spot. This area of Jupiter has been known since the 1600s because it is visible through telescopes. This oval spot is believed to be caused by a major disturbance in the atmosphere of Jupiter, something like a perpetual hurricane swirling at about 225 miles per hour. The widest part of the Great Red Spot is about three times the diameter of the Earth. This spot is usually red in color but sometimes fades to brown or disappears for awhile.

Jupiter has sixteen moons. The four largest moons are called Galilean moons because they were discovered by Galileo, an astronomer who lived in the sixteenth century. These four moons are named Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto.

