Space

SpaceX launched a rocket. It was carrying an Argentine Earth-observation satellite. It came from California's Central Coast. It lit up the night sky. It lit up social media.

Many people saw the rocket. People in San Francisco. People in Sacramento. People in Phoenix. And people in Reno, Nevada. They posted photos of the Falcon 9 rocket's launch. They posted photos of its return. It was the first time SpaceX landed a first-stage booster back at its launch site. That's at Vandenberg Air Force Base. It is about 130 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

The Air Force warned residents on the Central Coast that they might see multiple engine burns. They would come from the first stage. Residents might hear one or more sonic booms. Those would happen as it returned.

But many far beyond the region were taken by surprise. It happened when the launch lit up the sky. They wondered what the otherworldly looking sight was. Some speculated it was a comet. Others thought it was an alien aircraft.

"Something exploded in the sky west of Phoenix," Laura Gadbery wrote on Twitter. "Anyone catch it or know what it was?"

Lloyd Lawrence was another user. He lives in Phoenix. It is about 490 miles away from the launch site. He said he was driving on Interstate 10. He saw the launch. He said he "couldn't believe my eyes."

"I wondered who was holding the gigantic flashlight in the sky," he wrote.

Others in Reno, Nevada also saw the galactic wonder. Reno is about 340 miles away from the site.

Jill Bergantz Carley wrote : "OK Twitter, what the heck is this #UFO #brightlight #plume-a-licious thing we just saw in the sky above #Reno. It radiated beams of light!"

Debi Hammond wrote : "Strangest thing I've ever seen in the sky. Anyone know what this is?"

Californians from Los Angeles to Sacramento also posted their confusion. Sacramento is about 270 miles from the launch site.

Eric Garcetti is mayor of Los Angeles. He was among those trying to clear up the speculation. He tweeted a photo of the launch. He wrote: "Nope, definitely not aliens."

Those who knew they were watching a satellite launch posted videos. They captured the stunning spectacle. This included one taken over the downtown Los Angeles skyline. It also included a timelapse from Kern County.

The primary purpose of the SpaceX mission was to place the SAOCOM 1A satellite into orbit. But SpaceX also wanted to expand its recovery of first stages to its launch site at Vandenberg.

SpaceX had previously flown first-stage rockets back to land after Florida launches. But it had not done so on the West Coast.

SpaceX also has successfully landed Falcon 9 first stages. These have landed on so-called drone ships. They were off the coasts of Florida and California. All of this is part of its effort to decrease the cost of space launches. They can reduce the cost by reusing rockets. This costs less than allowing them to fall into the ocean.

The satellite is the first of two. They are from Argentina's space agency. The agency is called Comision Nacional de Actividades Espaciales. It will work in along with a constellation of Italian space agency satellites. Its acronym is short for Satelite Argentino de Observacion Con Microondas.

SAOCOM 1A carries a high-resolution instrument. It is called a synthetic aperture radar. It will be used for emergency management. This will happen during disasters. It will also be used for land monitoring. The second satellite will be SAOCOM 1B.