

# Beta Testing SkyShed's POD

## Setup in less than one hour!

by Dave Miller



When Wayne Parker with Skyshed announced a beta program for his new POD, I jumped at the opportunity. At Durango Skies, we do a lot of observatory installations and I was keenly interested in the functionality and ease of use of the POD. Well, it took awhile for my beta POD to arrive, but when it did, I immediately unboxed the dome and wall panels and went through the assembly process.

My first impression of SkyShed's POD is that it is very quick and easy to setup. It took me less than two hours for the initial setup and less than 45 minutes for subsequent setups. To put things in perspective, I've built a couple of six-foot Home Domes and each time it took me 30 plus hours to assemble. I've also built several SkyShed roll-off roof observatories and each time that has taken two to three days with additional help. To be able to assemble a POD by myself in under two hours is really amazing.

My second impression of the POD is that it is really big. I have a six-foot Home

Dome with walls and a six-foot by eight-foot SkyShed roll-off roof observatory setup in the Durango Skies showroom, but the POD almost made them look small. It is easy to see why a POD will handle most scopes. The SkyShed POD Web site has several photos of scope setups, including a 14-inch SCT and a 14.5-inch Dobsonian. I tried a six-inch LX75 refractor and found I had plenty of room to move around while using the scope.

### Initial Setup

As a beta tester, I received a "home video" of the POD assembly procedure a couple of weeks before my beta POD unit arrived. I watched the video once and then put it away for safe keeping. When the POD arrived, I followed my standard procedure of doing a setup without looking at the instructions, trusting the premise that, if it is designed well, it should be intuitive to put together. The POD definitely hit the mark here. I only referred to the video once to

identify which length of bolt goes in which hole. (Note that the production POD will come with an instruction manual and DVD).

To assemble a POD you will need a hammer, Allen wrench, large flat blade screwdriver and tape measure. I recommend a flat, level surface for assembly. If you put the POD together on an uneven surface, it will be harder to get the wall panels to fit together correctly. A wood deck or concrete pad is a perfect foundation for POD, but dirt or grass will work as well. After all, the POD is made of high-density polyethylene, so it will never rust or rot. For my initial POD assembly, I used a side room at the store.

The first step in assembly is to connect the five wall panels and one door panel to form the wall ring. The walls quickly lock together like LEGO brand building blocks. There is a pin at the bottom of each wall panel that fits into the hole at the bottom of the adjacent wall panel. Wall panels are seated together by tapping one wall panel down

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Wall panel bases with male pin and female seat.



Wall panel tops held together with "QuickGrip" clamp and with Allen head bolt being installed.



Roller bracket assembly.

with the hammer or rubber mallet. To pull the top of the wall panels together, SkyShed provides a "wall tool." Use the large flat blade screwdriver to pop out two plugs and then insert the wall tool, which pulls the panels together. The wall panels are then secured with two stainless steel bolts at the top and middle of the wall. After all the wall panels are in place, use the tape measure to make sure the wall ring is round. One additional tool that I found useful is an IRWIN Quick-Grip brand clamp, which provides a fast way of pulling the wall panels together without popping out plugs.

The next step is to add the dome roller wheels to the top of the walls. This step is quick and very easy; just drop a wheel into the pre-formed slot and then push the fiberglass pin through the pre-formed hole to secure the wheel. Some pins pushed easily all the way in and some needed coaxing with the hammer.

The last step is to get the dome sections in place. Two dome quarters are bolted together with four stainless steel bolts to form a half dome. The dome half that does not open is first set on the wall and secured with five roller bracket assemblies that keep the dome sections from lifting off the wall under high winds. The dome half that opens is then set into place and attached to the first half with two long bolts that go through the preformed holes.

### Portability

SkyShed bills its POD as an observatory that can be quickly disassembled to bring to the cabin, a star party, or your club's dark-sky site. So my first test was to see how quickly I could break down the POD and get it ready for transport. On my first attempt, I was able to take the POD apart in less than 20 minutes. The key to speed is to carry a bag to quickly drop the bolts into.

It also helps for not losing any of the 20 plus bolts and washers.

My next test was getting the POD to my dark sky site. I own a Toyota Tundra with a 5-foot by 6.5-foot bed, so I didn't think I would have any problems. Scott Baker, another beta tester, put a POD in his short bed Chevy pickup, so I copied his method for loading the walls and dome quarters. My first attempt took about 25 minutes, but I spent a lot of that time studying what Scott had done. To see just how fast I could load the POD, I pulled everything back out of the truck and was able to reload all the panels and dome quarters in less than 10 minutes. Remember to use tie down straps and have them ready before loading. With everything in place and tied down, I had no problems cruising down the road at 65 mph.

My final test was to see if the POD could be setup by one person. I'm 5-foot,

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**Assembled POD with 6-inch Refractor.**



**POD disassembled for loading in truck.**

10-inches and 165 pounds and put the POD together by myself more than once, so for me the answer is yes. But it was not easy. Assembling the wall panels was easy, but the hard part was getting the dome in place. Following the assembly instructions, each dome half is bolted together on the ground and then lifted into place. The trick is to lift a 7.5-foot half dome made of slippery polyethylene and weighing 70 plus pounds onto a round wall that is 4-foot off the ground. No matter how careful you are, the dome half wants to fall off the side or into the dome ring. I was able to get it into place by placing one end on the wall ring and carefully lifting the other end into place.

A second approach that I tried successfully was to build the dome in place, one quarter at a time. This is easier from a lifting perspective, but requires a lot more time and tools. Dome quarters won't sit on the wall without falling into the dome ring, so I used an 8-foot pole to hold the first dome quarter up while placing the other half on the wall ring. I also needed a stepladder to get to the top bolt, which is 7.5-foot off the ground and several clamps to hold the dome half together to add the remaining bolts. The bottom line here is to get help. It'll save you a lot of hassle.

### Usability

I wanted to give a first hand account of using the POD for stargazing, but my location has been in a constant pattern of clouds, rain and snow since it arrived a cou-

ple of weeks ago. Operationally, I found that the dome half was easy to open and that I could rotate the dome without a lot of force. Some of its best features are those dedicated to security. On the inside base flange are 1/2-inch holes for bolting the POD to a deck or staking it to the ground. With the ground stakes in place, my beta POD has not moved even though strong southwest winds knocked down several dead trees on my property while the POD has been located there. On the underside of the dome half that opens are two blocks that drop into wall notches when the dome is closed. Steel bolts are screwed from the inside, through the walls, and into these blocks and prevent the dome from rotating or coming open under high winds. And finally, the door comes with a lockable latch that prevents unwanted entry into the POD.

### Conclusions

If you are in the market for an observatory, the POD should definitely be on your list of options. A base price of under \$1,500, easy setup, and ease of portability to take it with you if you move, make for a winning combination. SkyShed has also been listening to the feedback from its beta testers, so the production POD will be even better. For additional information on SkyShed's POD, visit the SkyShed POD Web site [www.skyshed-pod.com](http://www.skyshed-pod.com) or come see us at the Durango Skies Telescope and Binocular Web site at [www.durangoskies.com](http://www.durangoskies.com). 

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