

Stargazers in awe as total eclipse arcs across Pacific

July 11 2010, by Martin Bernetti



The sun is seen partially covered by the moon on Easter Island, 3700 km off the Chilean coast in the Pacific Ocean. A total solar eclipse drew an 11,000-kilometer (6,800-mile) arc over the Pacific Sunday, plunging remote isles into darkness in a heavenly display climaxing on mysterious Easter Island.

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The skies grew black in the middle of the day Sunday as the Moon slipped in front of the Sun and aligned with the Earth, blotting out the sunshine that just moments earlier had swathed the island's silent, ancient stone guardians.

Applause erupted from thousands of stargazers who began gathering days ago on this remote Chilean outpost for the rare four-minute, 41-second eclipse.

"It was like being in the stadium at night with artificial light. It was like being in a dark room with a 10-watt bulb," awe-struck local official Francisco Haoa told AFP.

"It started with a shadow. The skies were perfectly blue, with lots of wind that chased away the clouds. Everyone applauded.

"We saw a luminous object near here and people started saying they were sure it was a UFO."

In Tahiti, where the solar eclipse began its trek, the effect was so stunning that crowds of football-mad Polynesians turned away from the World Cup final on their television screens to look to the skies instead.

"It was like the Sun was smiling," said eight-year-old Hinanui. "The Sun seemed like a horizontal crescent, then the Moon covered up the bottom of the Sun, which reappeared again as a crescent."

Opticians and pharmacies sold more than 120,000 pairs of protective eyewear in Tahiti, which has 260,000 inhabitants, and warned of the dangers of vision loss if people looked directly at the eclipse.

Beginning at 1815 GMT, when the umbra or shadow fell about 700 kilometers (440 miles) southeast of Tonga, the eclipse zipped in an easterly arc, cloaking Easter Island at 2011 GMT.

It finished with a pass across southern Chile and Argentina, where it came to an end at 2052 GMT, just before nightfall in Patagonia.

An estimated 4,000 tourists, scientists, photographers, filmmakers and journalists flocked to this World Heritage site of only 160 square kilometers (60 square miles), doubling the barren island's population.

The Sun is 400 times wider than the Moon, but it is also 400 times farther away. Because of the symmetry, the lunar umbra that falls on the face of the Earth is exactly wide enough to cover the face of the Sun.

Throughout human history, superstition, awe and dread -- fears for the birth or death of kings, victories or defeats, bumper harvests or gnawing hunger -- have attended the moment when the Earth is plunged into daytime darkness.

Easter Island authorities increased security, especially around key heritage sites, including the 3,000-year-old large stone statues, or moai, that put the far-flung ethnic Polynesian islanders on the world culture map.

In local ancient lore, such an eclipse "would have been seen as a very powerful signal of upcoming upheaval," as their world view was rooted in nature, in "the earth, the sea and especially the sky," said Patricia Vargas of the University of Chile.

A French and a Japanese tourist were arrested for mounting "platforms where they are not allowed to touch and climb the statues," said police chief Cristian Gonzalez.

Mayor Luz del Carmen Zasso said visitors were asked to treat the island with respect.

"Easter Island is an open-air museum, and the eclipse is part of this museum," she added.

The eclipse has brought a tourist boom to Easter Island and Tahiti, where American film director James Cameron was among the stargazers helping to bring a 10.8-million-dollar tourism bonanza to the archipelago.

Meanwhile, in the small Patagonian town of El Calafate, just across the border from southern Chile in the snow-capped Argentine Andes, hundreds of people gathered to witness the natural phenomenon.

"We are pleased and excited by the interest generated by the eclipse. The five daily flights arriving in El Calafate were full on Friday and Saturday, and the climate is excellent for watching," said tourism director Ana Ianni.

Forecasters said there were clear skies with below-freezing temperatures in the southern hemisphere winter, with all-terrain vehicles needed to brave the snowy mountains.

The more adventurous could choose to spend the day in heated tents, high up in mountain spots only accessible with the help of guides and the stunning Perito Moreno glacier as a backdrop.

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Citation: Stargazers in awe as total eclipse arcs across Pacific (2010, July 11) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-07-stargazers-awe-total-eclipse-arcs.html>

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