Eyes turn skyward as Venus travels across the sun

June 6 2012, by OSKAR GARCIA

The transit of Venus in front of the sun is seen from Cape May Point, N.J., Tuesday June 5, 2012. From the U.S. to South Korea, people around the world turned their attention to the daytime sky on Tuesday and early Wednesday in Asia to make sure they caught the once-in-a-lifetime sight of the transit of Venus, which won't be seen for another 150 years. (AP Photo/The Press of Atlantic City, Dale Gerhard)

None of us will likely see Venus pass, like a moving beauty spot, across

the face of the sun again.

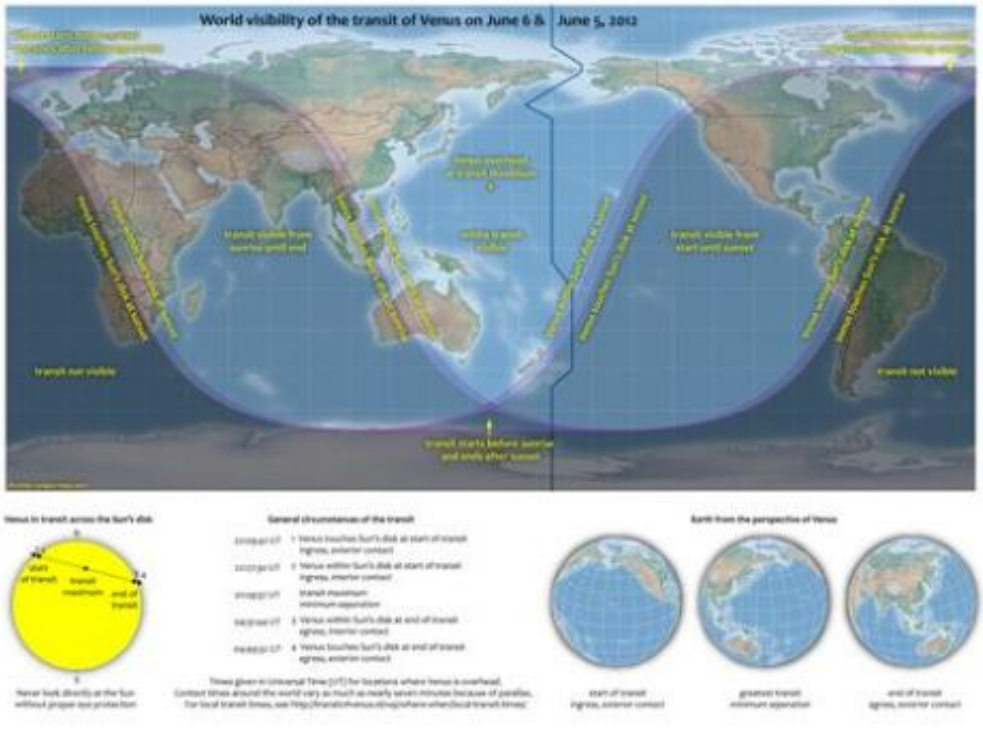
From the U.S. to South Korea, people around the world turned their attention to the daytime sky on Tuesday and early Wednesday in Asia to make sure they caught the rare sight of the transit of Venus. The next one won't be for another 105 years.

"If you can see the mole on Cindy Crawford's face, you can see Venus," Van Webster, a member of the Los Angeles Astronomical Society, told anyone who stopped by his telescope for a peek on Mount Hollywood.

For astronomers, the transit wasn't just a rare planetary spectacle. It was also one of those events they hoped would spark curiosity about the universe and our place in it.

Sul Ah Chim, a researcher at the Korea Astronomy and Space Science Institute in South Korea, said he hoped people see life from a larger perspective, and "not get caught up in their small, everyday problems."

"When you think about it from the context of the universe, 105 years is a very short period of time and the Earth is only a small, pale blue spot," he said.



This map provided by NASA shows the visibility for the transit of Venus passes in front of sun. Venus crosses the sun on Tuesday, June 5, 2012, from the Western Hemisphere (Wednesday, June 6 from the Eastern Hemisphere). Known as a transit of Venus, this won't happen again until 2117. The transit is happening during a 6-hour, 40-minute span starting after 6 p.m. EDT in the United States. (AP Photo/NASA)

While astronomers used the latest technology to document the transit, American astronaut Don Pettit aboard the International Space Station was planning to take photos of the event and post them online.

Meanwhile, terrestrial stargazers were warned to only look at the celestial event with a properly filtered telescope or cardboard eclipse glasses. If the sun is viewed directly, permanent eye damage could result.

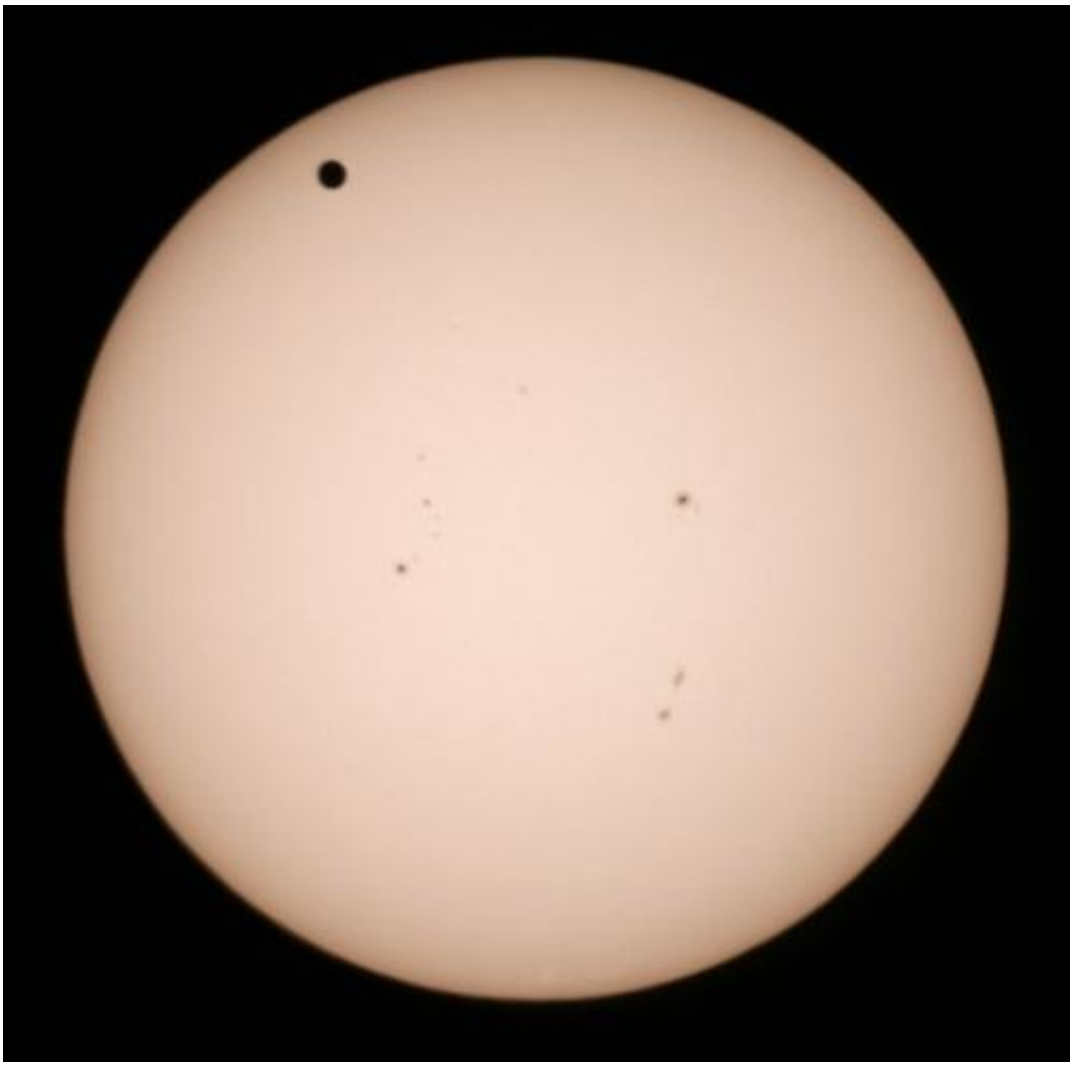
In Los Angeles, throngs jammed Mount Hollywood where the Griffith Observatory rolled out the red carpet for Venus. The last time the city witnessed a Venus transit was 130 years ago in 1882. A 2004 transit was not visible from the western U.S.

Telescopes with special filters were set up next to the lawn and people took turns peering at the sun before and during the transit. Astronomers and volunteers lectured about the rarity of a Venus pass to anyone who would listen.

Minutes before Venus first touched the outer edge of the sun, Sousa's "Transit Of Venus March" blared through. The crowd turned their attention skyward. For nearly 18 minutes, Venus appeared as a black spot.

Jamie Jetton took the day off from work to bring her two nephews, 6 and 11, visiting from Arizona to the observatory. Sporting eclipse glasses, it took a little while before they spotted Venus.

"I'm still having fun. It's an experience. It's something we'll talk about for the rest of our lives," she said.



Venus, upper left, transits the sun on Tuesday, June 5, 2012, as seen from San Pedro, Calif. The black dots on the surface near the center of the sun are sunspots. The next transit of Venus won't be for another 105 years. (AP Photo/The Daily Breeze,Chuck Bennett) MAGS OUT; NO SALES

Bo Tan, a 32-year-old software engineer took a half day off from work and went with his co-workers to the observatory. He admitted he wasn't an astronomy buff but could not miss this opportunity.

He pointed his eclipse glasses at the sun and steadied his Nikon camera

behind it to snap pictures.

"It makes you feel like a small speck in the universe," he said.

In Mexico, at least 100 people lined up two hours early to view the event through telescopes or one of the 150 special viewing glasses on hand, officials said. Observation points were also set up at a dozen locations.

Venus, which is extremely hot, is one of Earth's two neighbors and is so close in size to our planet that scientists at times call them near-twins. During the transit, it will appear as a small dot.

This will be the seventh transit visible since German astronomer Johannes Kepler first predicted the phenomenon in the 17th century. Because of the shape and speed of Venus' orbit around the sun and its relationship to Earth's annual trip, transits occur in pairs separated by more than a century.

Hong Kong stargazers use telescopes to observe the transit of Venus along the Victoria Habour in Hong Kong Wednesday, June 6, 2012. From the U.S. to South Korea, people around the world turned their attention to the daytime sky on Tuesday and early Wednesday in Asia to make sure they caught the rare sight of the transit of Venus. The next one won't be for another 105 years. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

It's nowhere near as dramatic and awe-inspiring as a total solar eclipse, which sweeps a shadow across the Earth, but there will be six more of those this decade.

In Hawaii, hundreds of tourists and locals passed through an area of Waikiki Beach where the University of Hawaii set up eight telescopes and two large screens showing webcasts of the transit as seen from telescopes at volcanoes on other Hawaiian islands.

But minutes after Venus crossed into the sun's path, clouds rolled overhead and blocked the direct view.

"It's always the challenge of being in Hawaii — are you going to be able to see through the clouds," said Greg Mansker, 49, of Pearl City, as he stood in line at a telescope.

The intermittent clouds didn't stop people from looking up through filters, but it did drive some to crowd the screens instead.

Hong Kong stargazers use telescopes to observe the transit of Venus along the Victoria Habour in Hong Kong Wednesday, June 6, 2012. Stargazers around the world are setting up special telescopes and passing out cardboard eclipse glasses to view the once-in-a-lifetime celestial cameo of Venus passing in front of the sun. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Jenny Kim, 39, of Honolulu, said she told her 11-year-old son the planet's crossing would be the only time he'd get to see the transit in person.

"I don't know what the future will be, so I think this will be good for him," Kim said as she snapped photos of the webcast with her smartphone.

Astronomers also planned viewings at Pearl Harbor and Ko Olina.

Some observers at the University of Alaska, Anchorage gathered on a

campus rooftop, peering at Venus through special filtered glasses and telescopes.

"It's not really spectacular when you're looking at it," Kellen Tyrrell, 13, said. "It's just the fact that I'm here seeing it. It's just so cool that I get to experience it."

NASA planned a watch party at its Goddard Visitor Center in Maryland with solar telescopes, "Hubble-quality" images from its Solar Dynamics Observatory Mission and expert commentary and presentations.

Most people don't tend to gaze at the sun for long periods of time because it's painful and people instinctively look away. But there's the temptation to stare at it during sky shows like solar eclipses or transits of Venus.

The eye has a lens and if you stare at the sun, it concentrates sunlight on the retina and can burn a hole through it. It's similar to when you hold a magnifying glass under the blazing sun and light a piece of paper on fire.

It can take several hours for people to notice problems with their eyes but, by that time, the damage is done and, in some cases, irreversible.

During the 1970 solar eclipse visible from the eastern U.S., 145 burns of the retina were reported, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Experts from Hong Kong's Space Museum and local astronomical groups were organizing a viewing Wednesday outside the museum's building on the Kowloon waterfront overlooking the southern Chinese city's famed Victoria Harbor.

The transit is happening during a 6-hour, 40-minute span that began just

after 6 p.m. EDT (2200 GMT) in the United States. What you can see and for how long depends on what the sun's doing in your region during that exact window, and the weather.

Those in most areas of North and Central America will see the start of the transit until the sun sets, while those in western Asia, the eastern half of Africa and most of Europe will catch the transit's end once the sun comes up.

Hawaii, Alaska, eastern Australia and eastern Asia including Japan, North and South Korea and eastern China will get the whole show since the entire transit will happen during daylight in those regions.