

Sky gazers flock to remote islands for total solar eclipse

March 19 2015, by Catherine Gaschka



A visitor looks at solar eclipse posters displayed for sale at the tourist office, in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

For months, even years, hotels on the remote Faeroe Islands have been fully booked by fans who don't want to miss an almost three-minute-long

astronomical sensation. Now the sky gazers just hope the clouds will blow away so they can fully experience Friday's total solar eclipse.

Scores of eclipse chasers and scientists have invaded the archipelago armed with telescopes, cameras and glasses for safe direct solar viewing ahead of the big event.

The weather forecast is better more than 2,000 kilometers (1,270 miles) to the northeast, in the Arctic islands of Svalbard, where spectators can hope for a clear day. The full eclipse will only be seen in a narrow path across the northern hemisphere, reaching the Faeroes at 0945 GMT (5:45 a.m. EDT) on Friday.

"This is our 10th total eclipse. We love to watch them and being able to look at the corona with your eyes in the middle of the eclipse is really an exciting moment, to experience the diamond rings coming and going," said Les Anderson, a 60-year-old from San Diego, California, in the Faeroe capital of Torshavn.

The population of the 18 rocky islands between Scotland and Iceland has swelled by approximately 10,000 for a few days from its usual 48,000 souls.

"There has never, never been so many people on the islands before," said Theresa Kreutzmann, head of the tourism office in Torshavn.



Two women, walk beside the harbor, in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

The two best places to fully experience the total solar eclipse are the Faeroes, where the moon covers the sun completely for 2 minutes 45 seconds, and Svalbard, more than 800 kilometers (500 miles) north of the Norwegian mainland, where it will be 15 seconds shorter.

A partial solar eclipse can be seen across Europe and parts of Asia and Africa. Britain's Meteorological Office says 95 percent of the sun will be covered in the Hebrides, Orkneys and Shetland Islands.

Although Faeroe camping sites have opened ahead of time for those willing to brave nighttime temperatures of around 1.5 degrees Celsius

(35 degrees Fahrenheit), authorities on Svalbard have reminded last-minute visitors that bringing a sleeping bag and finding a cozy corner for the night is not an option. The thermometer there hovers around minus 15 degrees Celsius (5 degrees Fahrenheit). And then there are the polar bears, which roam freely—meaning that people need to carry firearms when moving outside settlements.

On average, three bears are shot in self-defense every year on Svalbard with an estimated polar bear population of 3,000—roughly the same as the human population. Visitors have been attacked. Just Thursday, a bear attacked a tent in which a Czech tourist was sleeping, slightly injuring him. In 2011, a British teenager was fatally mauled by a bear that attacked the tent he was sleeping in.

The bears aren't an issue in the Faeroes.



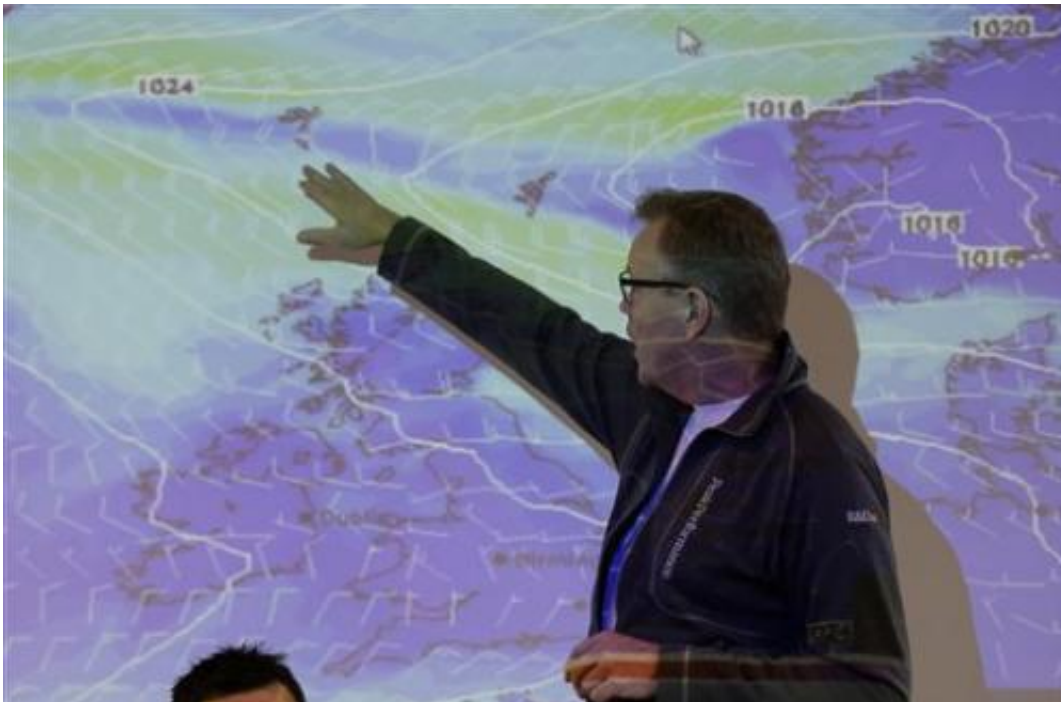
A woman walks along a coastal road in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous

Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

"We don't have polar bears here," laughed Torstein Christiansen, tourist chief in Torshavn. He said the islands' main problems are traffic and the treacherous and sudden fog that can quickly wrap the islands and its steep cliffs.

Finnur Johansen, 82, is eagerly awaiting the total solar eclipse. He recalls the one in 1954 when Faeroe animals were fooled by the sudden darkness.

"I remember the reaction of the birds. They go to sleep," Johansen said. "The hen, they go into hen house, under the perch, and slept there with the head under the wing."



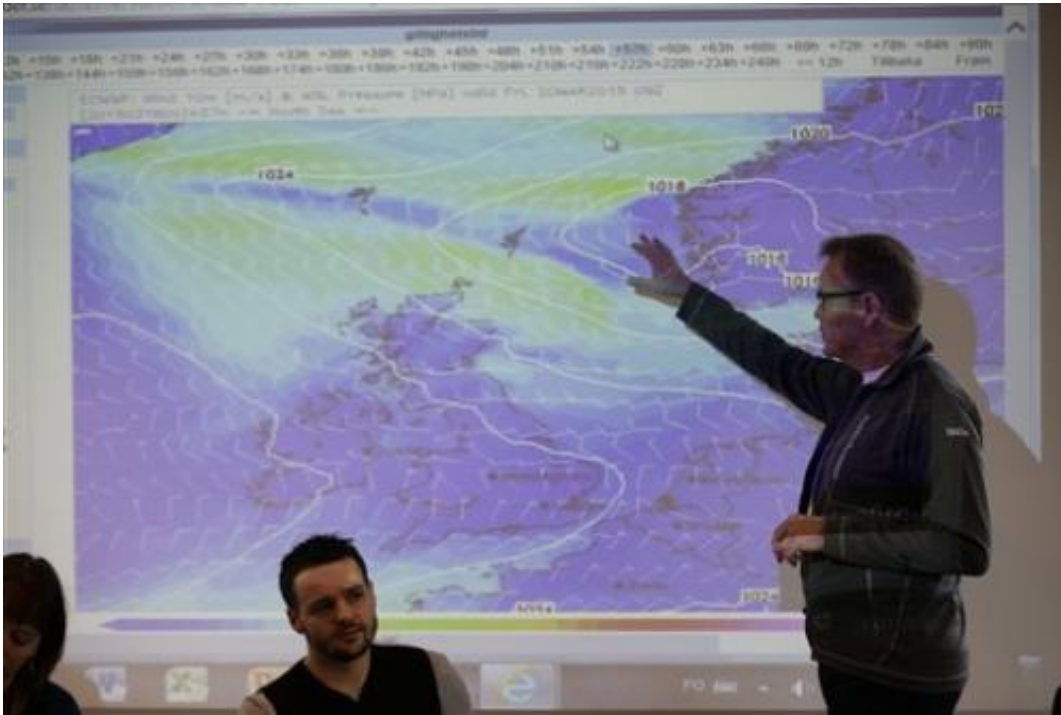
Meteorologist Soren Jacobsen points towards the Faeroe Islands on a graphic showing the weather forecast for 09:00 GMT, approximately 40 minutes before Friday's total solar eclipse over the Faeroe Islands during a press conference in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

If eclipse-chasers have been preparing for years, local authorities have been doing the same, Christiansen said. Authorities have posted online information to help visitors find accommodation and the best spots to be for the eclipse.

Solar eclipse merchandising—including books and toy puffins in eclipse T-shirts—are on sale, hotel prices have risen and a ferry boat has been moored in Torshavn to house visitors.



Solar eclipse postcards are displayed for sale at the tourist office, in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



Meteorologist Soren Jacobsen points at a graphic showing the weather forecast for 09:00 GMT, approximately 40 minutes before Friday's total solar eclipse over the Faeroe Islands during a press conference in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



A youth worker and children at a youth center play soccer in front of a mural which includes a Puffin bird, a species which breed in large numbers on the Faeroe Islands and are part of the local cuisine, in Torshavn, the capital city, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



Boats lie in the harbor, in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



Items of eclipse merchandise are displayed for sale in a store, in Torshavn, the capital city of the Faeroe Islands, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



A child throws a ball at a basketball net watched by a youth worker at a youth center in front of a mural which includes a Puffin bird, a species which breed in large numbers on the Faeroe Islands and are part of the local cuisine, in Torshavn, the capital city, Wednesday, March 18, 2015. The Faeroe Islands, a semi-autonomous Danish archipelago, and Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, are the only two places in the world where, cloud cover permitting, a total solar eclipse can be viewed from land on Friday morning. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

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