

Chapter 2

Understanding the Passion of the Eclipse Chaser

1 History of Eclipse Chasing

For hundreds of years people have been travelling to undertake scientific observations and experiments during celestial events such as eclipses. Scientific expeditions were funded in order to undertake important research during total solar eclipses, which often took years of planning, preparation and travel. The results of these observations and experiments were proudly reported upon return in national papers and journals. Each eclipse was an opportunity for science to progress, and focus was placed upon the scientific elements of totality. *Scientific American* was one such journal that reported eclipse expedition findings and reports dating back to the late 1800s make reference to 'esteemed individuals' who would travel alongside scientific expeditions to the path of totality. They tell of crowds of local people who would suddenly find themselves in a privileged position based purely upon where they lived. However, apart from the scientists and esteemed individuals, very few ordinary people would have been able to travel repeatedly to see a total eclipse.

That changed as travel became more accessible in the 1950s and 60s, allowing more people to travel independently to see a total eclipse. Modern day eclipse-chasing tours began in 1972 when the *Voyage to Darkness* cruise sailed 900 miles from New York to intercept the path of totality. This paved the way for other specialist tours to facilitate people to experience a total eclipse.

What a different world we live in today. Not only is travel much more affordable and accessible, but it is also simple to obtain information about the location of each eclipse, complete with weather predictions and suggestions on what else to see and do whilst in the area. It has never been easier to be an eclipse chaser. Furthermore, there are hundreds of specialist travel companies who now arrange eclipse chasing tours, and demand for these continues to grow. Increasingly, people are pursuing interests and events that are out of the ordinary, and there appears to be a growing interest in seeing a total eclipse. No longer is eclipse chasing for scientists and esteemed individuals. Today, anyone can become an eclipse chaser.

2 Eclipse Chasing as a Passion

An eclipse chaser can be defined as: *an individual who has made a life choice to give in to their insatiable desire to re-experience the thrill and excitement of totality*. The one thing that seems to initiate such an intense and passionate drive is experiencing totality for the first time. This seems to ignite the fire. Dr Glenn Schneider, professional astronomer, scientist, and passionate eclipse chaser, explains:

Seeing a total solar eclipse once gets under your skin and into your body and into your spirit.

But not everyone who sees a total solar eclipse then goes on to become an eclipse chaser. For example, millions of people are estimated to have seen the total eclipse in 1999, when the path of totality passed through many high density population regions of Europe and Asia. Similarly, the 2009 eclipse passed through high density population regions of Asia. Yet not all of these people have become eclipse chasers. Granted, most observers will be restricted by poverty, time, or their ability and freedom to travel. For many, seeing an eclipse was a great experience but one that does not need to be repeated. However, a number of these will find the fire ignited in them and subsequently go on to chase eclipses. These are the eclipse chasers who have developed a passion.

The word ‘passion’ comes from the Greek word ‘pathos’ meaning ‘*to suffer*’, and expresses an intense desire or compulsion, or unusual enthusiasm for an object, event, person, or thing. Eclipse chasers, as we shall see, can be extremely passionate about experiencing a total solar eclipse. This passion is not unique to eclipse chasers—everyone knows someone who is passionate about something. There are many stories of individuals who decide to embark upon their own personal mission to do something extreme—such as walk across the country or cycle their way around the world. This passion is different to having a general interest or liking something—it is all-consuming, focused, and sustained over many decades. People can be hugely driven to do the things that have personal meaning for them, and it is hoped this book will help us understand more about what drives this passion for eclipse chasing.

Eclipse chasers from all around the world come together along the path of totality. This sense of common purpose is hugely reinforcing and reaffirming—you are with others who ‘get it’, who know and love the experience, and feel the pull. There is a strong sense of belonging. To have a passion is exciting—and to share this with others once every 18 months or so is immensely satisfying.

3 The Eclipse Chasing Community

Within the eclipse chasing community or subculture, there is already an established vocabulary that is used when referring to eclipses. Much of this vocabulary is science-related. Eclipse chasers talk about the corona, prominences,

Baily's Beads, the umbra, the Diamond Ring, lunar limb profiles, and shadow bands (refer to [Chap. 5](#) for explanations). After observing an eclipse, these words will probably become part of your own vocabulary.

There are also amusing phrases, such as referring to those who have never seen an eclipse as an 'eclipse virgin', and referring to the time after totality as the 'cigarette moment'—clearly hinting at the parallels between experiencing totality and having an orgasm. Other words and phrases are used that attempt to explain the strong motivations of the eclipse chaser. Consider these comments from two different eclipse chasers in a recent eclipse chasing survey:

I saw my first eclipse in Zambia in all its splendour - that day I was definitely hooked and I became an eclipse chaser.

The first one was close to my country, Bulgaria - it was a good opportunity so I viewed one and then became addicted.

In these two quotes, the words 'hooked' and 'addicted' are used to describe how strong the pull was for these eclipse chasers after their first eclipse. Similarly, some eclipse chasers use language suggesting they think of chasing as an obsession—consider this quote, again from the same survey:

I'm going to go to every eclipse for the rest of my life. I have to do this - I just have to do this.

Eclipse chasers also use a number of metaphors to describe the eclipse experience. One such metaphor is that the first eclipse experience is like a doorway. This is used by the wonderfully expressive Diane Ackerman, bestselling author of many books including *A Natural History of the Senses* and *The Zookeeper's Wife*, in a poem that can be read at the end of this book. In this poem she writes: "*A door opens to the ghost towns of our past*", describing how the eclipse seems to connect us to our more primitive ancestors. Another commonly used metaphor is that of celestial mechanics—referring to the regularity and predictability of eclipses and other astronomical events as time-keepers on a grand scale. The language and metaphors are interesting, but do not explain to eclipse virgins the awe, the fascination, the fear, the beauty, the life-enhancing nature of totality, or the passion we feel for eclipse chasing.

4 Eclipse Chasers as Travellers

To be an eclipse chaser one must also be a traveller. The majority of eclipse chasers are passionate about travel and have an independent spirit with a tolerance for flexibility. The very few eclipse chasers that do not like to travel comment that they endure the travel for the reward of totality. If one is investigating the motivations of eclipse chasers, it is useful to understand a little about why people are passionate about travelling.

Travel as Part of Human Nature

The urge or desire to travel seems to be an innate part of being human. From an evolutionary perspective, travel may have been an essential requirement for survival, driven by the search for food and variability in partners. Hunter-gatherers would have had to explore new environments whenever resources in an area became depleted over time. There is now evidence that seeking novelty as a means of survival is encoded in our DNA, since in some circumstances it may have been those who took risks to explore who would have survived. In modern times, some people are required to move due to natural disasters, food shortages, political instability, and climate change. Others are forced to travel for economic reasons, to find work to support a family. Many people travel for leisure and describe a strong desire to travel. Human beings seem to be naturally curious about the world and are willing to explore. Our curiosity also extends beyond our world and into space. One of the most significant achievements of space exploration has been to allow us to look at Earth from a different perspective, showing us clearly the fragility of the atmosphere, the beauty of our planet, and the commonalities across all cultures. As noted by Norman Cousins, American peace activist:

What is most significant about the lunar voyage was not that men set foot on the Moon but that they set eye on the Earth.

In the same way, travelling to other countries allows us the opportunity to achieve an outsider's perspective of our own culture and beliefs—a different perspective on our own lives. Travel broadens the mind and satisfies the soul. Therefore the desire to travel can be seen as a desire to understand and challenge ourselves.

What Motivates People to Travel?

Despite the massive appeal of travel and the multi-billion dollar industry that is involved, there is little research on the psychology of why people are motivated to travel. Several simple theoretical models have been used to understand why people travel or migrate to different areas. The first is the Push/Pull theory as outlined by Everett Lee in 1966, and used to understand migration. In this theory, there is some internal motivation that pushes an individual to want to travel—the push. Then there is a pull that occurs from a particular country, location, or event which determines where they go and what they do. According to the theory, both push and pull factors are required for people to experience a desire to travel. Most research shows that we are pushed to explore by our psychological needs for security, belonging, and self-actualisation. It might be useful for us to consider using this broad framework to explore the things that are unique about the eclipse experience itself, things that make us want to experience it again and again (the

pull of totality). Then we can look at the factors that drive our motivation over many years, factors that keep us chasing eclipses (the push).

Researchers have also attempted to categorise travellers into types according to what they do when they travel, length of stay, cost, educational interest, learning a new skill, building on existing social connections, exploring cultures, seeing natural events, and attending social events. This categorisation may describe the *purpose* of a particular trip, but does not allow for the multiple reasons why people travel, or the meanings associated with travel.

Other researchers have relied upon the simple categorical distinction between *tourists*, who travel for short breaks and often do not immerse themselves in the local culture, and *travellers*, who are motivated to gain more understanding of the culture and people in different places.

The sociologist McCannell in his book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, suggests that people travel because they are searching for an authentic experience of the real world, in order to compensate for an increasing sense of alienation and isolation in their own lives. That is, we seek out travel experiences because we feel isolated within our own lives. Whilst this may say something important about modern Western culture, it does not resonate with the motivations of many travellers, nor eclipse chasers. Most travellers and eclipse chasers would argue that instead of fulfilling a deficit, their passion actually adds something positive.

It is, therefore, difficult to categorise and understand why people are motivated to travel. The desire for travel is a dynamic process, and one that we can only understand by investigating personal meanings for travel. Julia Harrison, a Canadian professor of sociology, explored this in her book *Being a Tourist*. Personal means for travel included finding intimacy and connection, expressing a personal aesthetic, exploring the meaning of home, and making sense of a globalised world. Ultimately we still have a lot to learn and understand about our motivation for travel.

5 How Eclipse Chasers are Perceived By Others

The media love reporting news of a total eclipse. Prior to an eclipse, a lot of focus is placed upon how the local community is preparing to deal with the increase in visitors for the occasion. Sometimes an eclipse chaser will be interviewed in an attempt to communicate what totality is like. Those who are portrayed in the media tend to be the more extreme chasers, with a background in science and possible connection with NASA or some other scientific organisation or university. Often the eclipse chaser is quoted trying to communicate the magic of totality. Sometimes the context is lost, or the message is a little unclear, or communicated in a way that makes the eclipse chaser sound a little odd. However, there are also some great examples of news articles which capture the excitement and thrill of a total eclipse, and how powerful and significant it is for everyone. Some articles even

manage to capture the moment where the journalist then becomes an eclipse chaser themselves after experiencing totality.

Views of an Eclipse Virgin

Those who have never experienced a total solar eclipse are often bemused by eclipse chasers. Although my family, friends and colleagues do appear to be genuinely interested in eclipses, they do not understand how powerful the experience is and why it means so much to me.

To explore the views of an eclipse virgin, I engaged my older sister Vicki in a discussion. We obviously share the same background, growing up on a farm in North Queensland, Australia. Vicki recalls our father sharing his excitement about a partial eclipse in 1976, and viewing this partial. I have no real recollection of this eclipse as I was about 3. My first memory of an eclipse is another partial eclipse that Vicki also recalls, occurring a few years later in 1981, where we were both instructed at school on how to observe safely. We both recall viewing this partial eclipse.

What I find intriguing is this—given the similarities of background, curiosity of our father, and viewing a partial eclipses, why is it that I have become so passionate about eclipses and she has not? I saw my first total eclipse in 1999 and from then on made the decision that I just had to do this for the rest of my life. Had she had the opportunity to see a total eclipse would she too have become an eclipse chaser? Perhaps it is not just opportunity at play. She shares an interest in travel and other cultures and has travelled in the past, although she has settled in the area local to where we grew up. I have made different choices to travel extensively and have lived away from Australia for the past 15 years. I am perhaps more impulsive than she, and feel more comfortable taking risks. There are many other differences, along with opportunity, personality, different drives and motivations, and personal circumstances which all combine perhaps to explain why I am an eclipse chaser and she is not. But I believe the biggest difference is that I have experienced totality and she has not had this opportunity.

When I asked Vicki about her views of eclipse chasers, she explained that eclipse chasers are no different to others who are passionate about their hobbies. She is more interested in the places they go to and what they discover about local cultures rather than hearing about the eclipse. Of the eclipse experience itself, she comments:

Yep, it goes dark, what more is there to tell?

She believes that it is the whole adventure and not just the eclipse itself that may be the motivation for eclipse chasers. She adds:

I think seeing any eclipse is something special but I don't think about how the eclipse experience personally affects eclipse chasers.

She acknowledges that there can be, just like any other event, personal variations in the level of interest in totality. She is aware that watching an eclipse on TV does not convey any true sense of the eclipse experience, and can understand that some people can be pulled towards certain activities, but she personally does not see how totality could pull her in. When asked about the passion eclipse chasers have she was quite amused:

I see no major ‘thrill’ as such to seeing an eclipse. I can see the thrill in jumping out of a plane, but it’s a little weird to be THAT thrilled about going to see an eclipse.

Vicki’s comment here is representative of many who have not seen totality. Most people understand the excitement and what may be involved when jumping out of a plane, but it is difficult to imagine the ‘thrill’ of totality. Eclipse chasers are expressing great excitement at something which in no way appears to be exciting. It would therefore make sense that those who seem excited by totality would come across as ‘weird’.

Vicki did not express a strong desire to see a total eclipse; however, she would probably travel to see one if it was somewhere she wanted to go and time and money weren’t an issue. Luckily for her, location, time, and money are all on her side to enable her to be in the path of totality for the November 2012 total eclipse—it’s almost in her backyard. We will be sharing that experience together, and although she is looking forward to seeing what all the fuss is about, she is more gratified by the fact that her daughter will be able to experience a total eclipse at a young age. I am interested as to whether her first experience of totality will light the same fire in her as it did me.

6 Understanding the Pull of Totality

A total eclipse can have a tremendous personal impact—and once experienced some then go on to become eclipse chasers. There is something amazing about the totality experience that is different to experiencing other things that also inspire awe. For example, the Grand Canyon is an amazing place—I can still recall my first sight of it. My jaw did literally drop and I was dumbfounded with the immensity, the scale, and the beauty of the experience. But would I repeatedly visit the Grand Canyon? Do I feel ‘hooked’ on repeating that experience? Would I get the same experience if I were to visit there year after year? Do people express a ‘passion’ for repeatedly seeing the Grand Canyon?

Despite the profound impact that a total eclipse can have on a person, there are still difficulties in communicating the experience to those who have not seen a total eclipse. What are missing are clear, coherent accounts of what it is like to experience totality, that is, the phenomenology of the eclipse experience, which is then analysed to give a brief overview of the lived experiences of a total eclipse. This book will hopefully allow those outside of this amazing experience a richer, more detailed insight into the mysterious world of the eclipse chaser.

Total Addiction

The Life of an Eclipse Chaser

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