

TOTALLY OUT OF SIGHT

David Makepeace has journeyed to the tip of Antarctica, to the Iraqi border and, most recently, to the Libyan desert just to stand and stare at the sky. Is he nuts? Nope. He's Canada's most famous eclipse chaser

BY KEVIN GRAY PHOTOGRAPH BY LORNE BRIDGMAN



IT'S RIGHT THERE IN THE BIBLE, Amos 8:9. "And on that day, says the Lord God, 'I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the Earth in broad daylight.'" Weird, but He didn't say anything about the Red Bull concession tent blasting Ja Rule into the limitless Sahara. Nor did He mention the vanishing line of porta-potties, the sea of military-style tents, or the 3,000 people from a dozen nations speaking in their myriad tongues. But such is the sprawling scene outside Jalu, a barren desert outpost in northeast Libya, where these pilgrims have come to bear witness to a giant shadow from space that will rush over them in what is the wildest sideshow in the solar system: a total eclipse of the sun.

On this sweaty, camel-croaking Wednesday in March, the crowd has left their tents, set up by Libyan tour operators, and dispersed into the desert. They have dragged along white plastic chairs and coolers. With only minutes to go, they have hunkered down beneath big-mouthed telescopes and fancy cameras. Most of these people are mere rubberneckers, thrill-seekers with an extra week of vacation who figured they'd try something exotic. Others are professional types: editors of science magazines and astrophysicists from NASA. (If you were to yell, "Hey, geek!" the whole place would duck, anticipating a spitball.)

Here, the faithful are the cool kids, a small band of New Agey dreamers whose lifelong goal is to spend as much time "in the shadow" as they can. They are eclipse chasers, and they will go to the farthest places to find one. By one estimate, there are fewer than 350 hardcore chasers on the planet, and one of the most zealous and outspoken is David Makepeace, a Toronto film editor, also known by the name he gave himself for his Web site: Eclipse Guy.

At forty-three years old, Makepeace is beefy, with a peach-fuzz dome, a snarky smile, and the riveting blue eyes of a true believer. He wears a single gold-hoop earring, a blonde goatee, and a bunch of hippie string bracelets that dangle from his right wrist. He is a born proselytizer. "It's goosebump time, people," he yells, stretching his arms skyward as the light begins to slowly shift from pale white to eerie twilight. "No turning back. The shadow is upon us."

Nobody really listens to Makepeace, except for a small posse of his friends. Other people just nod, and give a tolerant smile, the way they would for a guy at a concert who whoops and yells out the name of the song as the band starts to play it. "It makes me feel huge," says Makepeace, shaking out his fingers like a dancer in a musical, or someone on speed. "It elates me."

In the past fifteen years, Makepeace has witnessed fourteen eclipses in eleven countries on seven continents. He has spent just under twenty-three minutes in the moon's umbra, or shadow. According to his "umbra log," today's eclipse, lasting four minutes and four seconds, will raise his tally to nearly a half hour. For two years, Makepeace – who spends most of his workdays in a dark studio editing movie trailers and cutting children's shows for cable TV – has been waiting and planning for this moment. He has already trained one cam-

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order and three cameras at the sky and obsessively tweaks them throughout the day. Among chasers, Makepeace is known as one of the best chroniclers of eclipses on the Internet. His Web site, EclipseGuy.com, is a vault of videos, photos, facts, and hype. On it he proclaims, "I am Canada's busiest eclipse chaser," and admonishes visitors, "You must see a total solar eclipse at least once before you die!"

Here in Libya, you see the kind of caffeinated camaraderie among chasers that you'd expect in the parking lot at a jam-band concert. And by the looks of it, some of the same enthusiasts have shown up, but with new paraphernalia. There are old men in tie-dye shirts and pale legs showing off telescopes; high-school teachers in camo bragging about their math clubs back home; and one guy smack out of a Simpsons episode, a nutty professor wielding a red laser, slashing at the sky each night as he nasally explains Einstein's theory of whatever. To

strike up a conversation with anyone here means falling into a rabbit hole of astronomy lecture and spontaneous confession. A grown man with a bowl cut and a crisp safari jacket tells me eclipses are "better than sex."

In some areas of the camp, chasers adhere to a closely observed etiquette. No yelling. No hooting. No jumping up and down. Makepeace is not one of those chasers. "Orange, orange, orange," he calls out, as the sky darkens, like a fierce storm is coming, and the horizon is suddenly ringed in a surreal 360-degree sunset. His friends hug him, shoot each other with camcorders, laugh with ecstasy eyes. "This is undeniably, ethically, cosmically huge!"

TO KNOW DAVE MAKEPEACE is to be pummeled by his enthusiasm until you submit. His dedication is so righteous, his speechifying so poetic, and his mind so startlingly trippy, that he regularly seduces family and friends along on his "far-out journeys" to see eclipses. In the past, these have included boarding an icebreaker to Antarctica, flying in a rickety prop plane into Australia's outback, and driving to within 100 kilometres of the Iraqi no-fly zone in southern Turkey. This time around, he has wrangled his friend Michael Riley, a TV and film actor, and Noelle Elia, a freelance writer dressed wholly in black, along for the ride.

"There are all these little phenomena you can play with," Makepeace tells Elia, snatching a straw hat from my head and holding it a foot above the ground as the eclipse progresses. Through the holes in the hat, the sun makes dozens of replicated quarter-crescents on the sand. "Isn't that killer?"

Like all good stories, Makepeace's obsession begins with a girl. In 1991, he followed a woman to Baja, Mexico, where she was working for a tourism company. The romance sputtered, but it was there, on a wilting day in July, that he witnessed one of the century's more spectacular eclipses. The sky went black for almost a full seven minutes, just forty-two seconds less than the maximum time any eclipse can last.

"I just remembered the next day, sitting at the Sea of Cortez, just being astounded by what I had seen, and feeling really changed by it," says Makepeace. "And of course, as soon as it

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WHO TURNED THE LIGHTS OUT? ECLIPSES THROUGH THE AGES



October 22, 2134 BC

In China, the earliest written record of a solar eclipse tells of a dragon that devours the sun. Two royal astronomers (named Hi and Ho) are supposed to shoot arrows into the sky to chase it away, but, too drunk, they fail and are executed for their indiscretion.

May 28, 585 BC

The Lydians and Medes abruptly end their five-year war when the sun disappears mid-battle. Spooked, they sign a peace treaty and seal their friendship with a double marriage.

April 10, 628 AD

The total eclipse is blamed for the death of Japan's first female ruler, Empress Suiko.

May 5, 840 AD

King Louis of Bavaria is so frightened by the eclipse that he drops dead on the spot.

October 27, 1780

A Harvard professor of mathematics negotiates with the British during the Revolutionary War to witness a total eclipse in enemy territory. Due to an error in navigation, he misses the mark by a few miles.





Top: The makeshift tent city in Jalu, Libya. Bottom: A chaser sets his sights while Muslims turn their backs in prayer.

was over I was like, ‘I want to do that again. I want to do *that* again. *That* was fucking brilliant. Give me more.’ It’s why you get back on the ride, because of the thrill.”

Any number of the chasers here today are willing to explain in textbook detail the clock-work solar system’s eclipse trick. But pretty much, it’s what you already know from grade school: The moon blocks the sun. So really, what’s the big deal? Total eclipses happen

roughly once every eighteen months. But because the earth is three-quarters ocean, and much of its land is remote, they often go unseen. When the moon’s shadow does pass over populated areas, a little thing like cloud covering can basically eclipse the eclipse.

That’s why Libya is proving so ideal: It’s dry and flat. That’s why so many chasers have traveled thousands of miles to be here. Some eclipses simply glance off a fraction of the

Earth’s surface, but the path of today’s eclipse is a long one, starting in Brazil, crossing the Atlantic into Africa, and moving diagonally through Libya, Turkey, and parts of Asia, then ending at daybreak in Mongolia. We are here on the centre line, in a spot where totality will last the longest. As the sky darkens further, a wind kicks up. The temperature drops to an autumn coolness. You suddenly realize you don’t need your sunglasses. Venus begins to blaze away in the sky, then Mars and Mercury come out.

As the moment of totality looms, the crowd becomes agitated. Hundreds of people stand up almost at once, necks stretched, as if they’re trying to get closer to the moon itself. “All right,” says Makepeace, addressing the masses, “four more minutes. The cosmic joke is coming.” People whoop and holler. A woman says, “It’s getting creepy out.” And then, with seconds to go, the sky goes black, the crowd erupts in disjointed chatter.

“Oh my God.”

“It’s the end of the world.”

“Holy shit.”

“Whoa, imagine the first time people saw this.”

“Take your hat off.”

“Holy shit, look at that.”

“There’s Mercury, there’s Mercury.”

“Wait, which one is Mercury?”

“Oh my God, here it comes.”

“Wait, are you crying?”

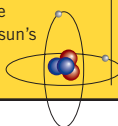
Just before totality hits, at 11:26 a.m., the desert looks like a scene out of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Nearly everyone is on their feet, faces turned upward, arms around their friends and family, waiting. What they see is spectacular. The sun is a brilliant blazing sliver that forms a gossamer halo around the moon. Just before disappearing completely, it creates a dollop on one side, producing what chasers call a diamond ring. Then it’s gone, and the sun’s corona – a super-heated plasma of two million degrees – can be clearly seen. Ghostly grey streamers shoot outward into the black night. People looking through telescopes can see tiny red flames licking at the edge of the moon’s black disc. And on the horizon is a stupefying yellow and orange twilight, as if the earth is quietly burning. Time seems to stand still.

July 28, 1851

The first photograph of a total eclipse is taken at the Royal Observatory in Königsburg, Prussia by a man known simply as “Berkowski.”

August 18, 1868

Frenchman Pierre Janssen and Brit J. Norman Lockyer independently detect the existence of a new element – later dubbed Helium – while observing the sun’s corona during an eclipse.



May 29, 1919

British scientist Arthur Stanley Eddington takes advantage of an eclipse to prove that the usually drowned-out light from stars near the sun is bent by the sun’s gravitational force, once and for all confirming Einstein’s theory of relativity.

January 24, 1925

The largest crowd to witness a total eclipse up to this date occurs when one passes over 96th Street in uptown Manhattan.

July 10, 1972

The first ever “eclipse cruise” sails 900 miles into the Atlantic Ocean from New York with 834 passengers (and one cat).



November 24, 2003

A chartered jet departing from Melbourne, Australia takes a group of chasers 40,000 feet over Antarctica to view an eclipse. The flight lasts 13 hours and 58 minutes, setting a world record for longest domestic flight, since it took off and landed in the same place.





Toronto's David Makepeace, known as the Eclipse Guy, captures his friend's post-eclipse breakdown on his video camera.

Moments later, the whole process reverses itself, and the sun slowly reappears. By then, Makepeace and his friends are in a group hug, with Makepeace videotaping them all with one extended arm. "We were here, man," says his friend Riley. "We saw every phenomenon."

"We saw everything," says Makepeace, his face just inches from Riley's, as if they'll kiss.

A few moments later, Elia breaks down in tears. "I want to be with her," she says, looking skyward at the retreating moon, and crumbling up in the sand, chin to knees. "I want to wrap my arms around her. I want to hug everyone. I'm on a high. I just want a big hug, a big cosmic hug."

Makepeace is kneeling now, talking to Elia. The rest of the crowd is slowly packing up their equipment, funnelling back to their camp and to lunch. Makepeace is filming Elia as they talk.

"That's why they're so special," he says, "because you don't get them all the time. You've got to wait two or three years."

"I just feel so raw, so out of language," says Elia. "I wonder if I missed something."

"Man, we all go through that," he says. "This is exactly what creates chasers. Because you want to do it again. Yeah, you want to do it again."

AN HOUR OR SO LATER, both Makepeace and Elia are wandering around the camp looking exhausted, spent, post-coital, vulnerable. Makepeace, who lives in a two-bedroom apartment near Toronto's western harbour, cluttered with teddy-bear wizards, Deepak Chopra books, and several glossy Avril Lavigne posters, already has the next eclipse on his mind. In 2008, he'll head up to the Canadian Arctic to see a rare sunrise eclipse, and he's willing to risk the high threat of cloudy skies

for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But right now, in the desert, he's mostly dazed, and looking a little peeved at having me hovering. Gone is the gregarious hugger and pontificator, replaced, momentarily, by a rattled soul. In fact, the rest of the camp seems equally subdued. The midday heat is once again wilting everyone. The tents are like saunas. People are taking refuge near the coolers of non-alcoholic beer (Libya is a dry country) and playing cards amid the fumes of idling trucks outside the vast catering tents. There's nothing to do but wait for the buses to take them home tomorrow. One hippie chick, whose boyfriend proposed to her during the eclipse, is showing off her new engagement ring.

"It's so different than this morning," Makepeace tries to explain. "The thing is so taken up . . . and I'm walking around with a sort of post-eclipse . . . ya know."

"Yeah, like bummed," says Elia.

"No, not bummed," Makepeace says quickly. "Nobody's bummed. It's just the energy level has been brought down. The thing's been released and now we're sort of, you know, thinking about what happened, what it was like, how our expectations were met, or weren't. You've just been going on adrenaline, and everything pops. You can't stand."

"It's like sex," says Elia, twisting her fingers together, "like this exhaustion."

"Yeah, you can say that," says Makepeace, as a large, quiet group of Japanese march past, their leader holding a flag and wearing a full-face sun visor. "How the partial phases are the build up, then the climax of totality, and then the release. And then, you know, you're smoking, and waiting for room service to bring you a sandwich or something." ■

Kevin Gray is a senior writer at Condé Nast Portfolio.



ECLIPSE CHASERS have a range of options to view the total eclipse on August 1, 2008, but the area with the longest "time of totality," or total darkness, will be near Nadym, Russia, close to the Arctic Ocean. This spot is a risk, however, because of the great cloud cover that typically hovers over it. Also, the Arctic ice will likely still be too frozen to make it possible to get there by boat.

The best bets are China, particularly near the cities of Hami and Jiuguan, where the chance of cloudiness is only 30 to 40 percent, or in a chartered plane, from which the eclipse can be viewed from above the clouds.

●●●●● UPCOMING ECLIPSES ●●●●●

August 1, 2008

Path of eclipse: Northern Canada (Grise Fjord, Nunavut), Greenland, Russia, western Mongolia, and China

Longest total-eclipse time occurs: In northern Russia

Maximum duration: 2 minutes, 27.2 seconds

Best spot for visibility: Northern China (30 to 40 percent chance of clouds)

July 22, 2009

Path of eclipse: India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, southern Japan, the Marshall Islands, and the Gilbert Islands

Longest total-eclipse time occurs: Off the southern coast of Japan, near Iwo Jima Island

Maximum duration: 6 minutes, 38.8 seconds

Best spot for visibility: Eastern China and the Pacific Ocean (40 to 50 percent chance of clouds)

July 11, 2010

Path of eclipse: The Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Easter Island, southern Chile, and Argentina

Longest total-eclipse time occurs: In the South Pacific Ocean

Maximum duration: 5 minutes, 20.2 seconds

Best spot for visibility: On a boat in the Mid-Pacific (40 to 70 percent chance of clouds)

For more predictions, see MrEclipse.com, which is maintained by NASA astrophysicist Fred Espenak.

✈✈ GETTING THERE ✈✈

Eclipse Guy recommends these "astronomy travel" specialists:

Spears Travel
Bartlesville, Oklahoma
(918) 333-7620
(800) 688-8032
SpearsTravel.com

TravelQuest International
Prescott, Arizona
(928) 445-7754,
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TravelQuest-International.com