

# On tour with the eclipse chasers

They spend their lives seeking seconds of darkness • Some call it an intellectual orgasm • I went to Spain to lose my virginity



*Kryss Katsiavriades and Talaat Qureshi, photographed in Wood Green (Rudi Zygadlo)*

Somewhere above us, from behind the castle walls perhaps, a man yodels. It rings out over the terracotta rooftops and the forest towards the horizon. I wonder if he does this every time, to coax the celestial bodies, or if he, like me, is a virgin.

There are a hundred or so of us on the hillside, groups arranged discreetly in west-facing pockets of the topography — on rocky outcrops, under pine trees — private and collective, like opera boxes. A hundred bodies, several hundred lenses: silver specs, specialised binoculars, phones and long-barrelled cameras, a maritime sextant perhaps, like the one I know my dad

will be unboxing in Scotland — all focusing light on this baked hillside tinderbox. That would be a fitting way to go.

The yodel makes me apprehensive — about distracting noises — but soon it is a distant memory. Everything has shifted. The land is newly lit gold. The grass, the colour of Alhambra beer. The castle walls and the belfry, a pink copper. Next to me, Meara's belly eclipses a section of the lapis sky. Her mother puts her hand on it. "It's kicking," they say, with wide eyes. "It's kicking like wild."

I feel for the tremor, a miniature earth quaking under my palm. Far below us, a sharp shadow dissects the bullfighting ring. A voice in the town howls, and a collective inhalation rushes up the hillside, through my body and over the world. The sun turns black.

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A month earlier, I find husband and wife Kryss Katsiavriades and Talaat Qureshi on [eclipse-chaser-log.com](http://eclipse-chaser-log.com), a website that logs eclipses and the number of minutes of totality witnessed by chasers from around the world. It's a league table of sorts. Retired computer programmer and data analyst Kryss is number five in the UK (with 52 minutes 59 seconds of totality, from 20 total solar eclipses at the time of writing). Retired IT lecturer Talaat is a couple of places behind. Including partial and annular eclipses, Kryss has logged 29 in total, but, as I have been learning lately, even a 99% partial solar eclipse has nothing on a total eclipse. None of the theatre, mysticism, fear factor, skittish animal behaviour.

"Seeing a partial eclipse bears the same relation to seeing a total eclipse as kissing a man does to marrying him," says Annie Dillard in her landmark essay, Total Eclipse. Totality is in a league of its own. Totality is what they are chasing.

I can see from Kryss's own pleasingly 1.0 website, replete with travelogues, essays, grainy photos and diagrammatic GIFs, that he is pedagogic about the subject; so when I discover the couple don't live a million miles away, I get in touch, hoping that they might help me prepare for Spain. This

apparently life-changing experience is going to last barely a minute and a half; I want to get it right.

We are in the eye of the year's third heatwave when I travel to Wood Green to meet them. It's a sultry 34 degrees, and the people of London are rushing from shade to shade with motorised fans in hand. As I step on the Tube, a push notification tells me that Bonnie Tyler has died in Faro, Portugal. I check if the town lies in the path of totality, which will sweep in a scythe-like arc from Greenland down to the Balearics, clipping the north-eastern tip of Portugal on 12 August.

There are, after all, coincidences to be found in the world of eclipses: take the foundational one, that, when viewed from Earth, the moon appears exactly the same size as the sun, perfectly occluding it when the three celestial bodies are in alignment. This phenomenon doesn't happen on any other planet in the solar system and it won't continue forever because our moon is slowly drifting away from the earth. Alas, Faro is in the Algarve. Outside Wood Green station, I spot Kryss in a bright green eclipse T-shirt and unruly silver mop and beard a la Jerry Garcia. I ask how many such T-shirts he has. "Close to 50," he replies. "In Chile 1994, I bought over a dozen as I liked them. In India 1995, we didn't find any so Talaat had some painted."

We choose an air-conditioned bar serving Japanese food and spread out on sofas. Kryss and Talaat are immediately inquisitive about my name and genealogy, displaying a level of cultural curiosity which can only come from a lifetime of travel, and speaking eight languages fluently between them. The pair chat to a slightly bemused waiter in a mix of Hindi, Bengali and more besides before landing on a common tongue which is not English to order drinks. They are citizens of the world. Talaat was born in Pakistan and came to London as a child. Kryss was born here. "My family are from Cyprus. Ethnically I'm Greek, legally I'm British and culturally I'm a Londoner," he says with a cockney flourish.



*Kryss Katsiavriades and Talaat Qureshi have witnessed dozens of eclipses (Rudi Zygadlo)*

He has prepared a PowerPoint presentation for me on the forthcoming August eclipse, but first, a potted history of his passion, beginning in 1966, stargazing from his dormer window in Highbury, where he saw a partial and dreamed of seeing a total. The detail with which he remembers each one, from Java in 1983 to Mexico in 2024, is impressive. “My second eclipse, I saw in the Philippines in 1988, from the roof of City Hall in General Santos,” he says. “And there was a hard-nosed journalist from LA, cursing about being there, but during totality she had tears in her eyes.” The conversion of the virgin is a common story. It’s instantaneous. As soon as totality ended in Mexico (1991) a sceptical Talaat immediately turned to Kryss and gushed: “When is the next one?”

Of their most recent eclipse in 2024: “We found a deserted beach with no street lights, no mariachi bands, no howling Americans. Only a group of Danish astronomers, 200 metres away. We didn’t hear a peep out of them.”

Quietude seems to be key. “If you’ve never seen a total eclipse before, some people are inclined to have a party.” But that distracts from the main event. “We like to listen,” says Talaat, “to the sound of the birds and the insects. Fish jumping out of the water. Don’t stay glued to the sun, look around you. Look out for shadow bands, and if you’re lucky, you can actually see the approach of the umbra (the moon’s shadow) racing towards you at 1,000 mph.”

My friend, writer Martin Jackson, talks about these shadow bands too. In 2019, for his second eclipse, he flew to Mendoza, Argentina, rented a car and drove it to the desert to intersect the path of totality where nobody else was around. “When they happened, which was right before the eclipse, it kind of scared me and also blew my tiny mind. I had no idea that the light could do that, would do that, might do that... It was like being in a swimming pool and looking down at the floor and seeing the light ripple. Bonkers. Beautiful. Stupid.”

“In Mazatlan,” says Kryss, “we watched it rushing across the sea towards us like a tsunami of darkness, cirrus clouds between us and the horizon, each turning black one at a time. It reminded me of the dementors in Harry Potter. It can be quite terrifying.”

Venezuela (1998) was similar. “It was 2pm and we were on a beach under a tree, you could see the shadow approaching. The sea turned green and the sand turned golden. The sky was perfectly clear. When totality began you could see Mercury and Jupiter either side of the sun and Venus over there and a magnificent frigatebird landed on the beach.”

But finding a quiet spot in Spain this year might not be so easy, Kryss warns: “Because the eclipse is so low down — eight degrees above the horizon — observation sites will be at a premium, so I think there will be crowds. And then there are the wildfires. The path of totality doesn’t know anything about land, sea, visas, Trump, hotels, price gouging.”



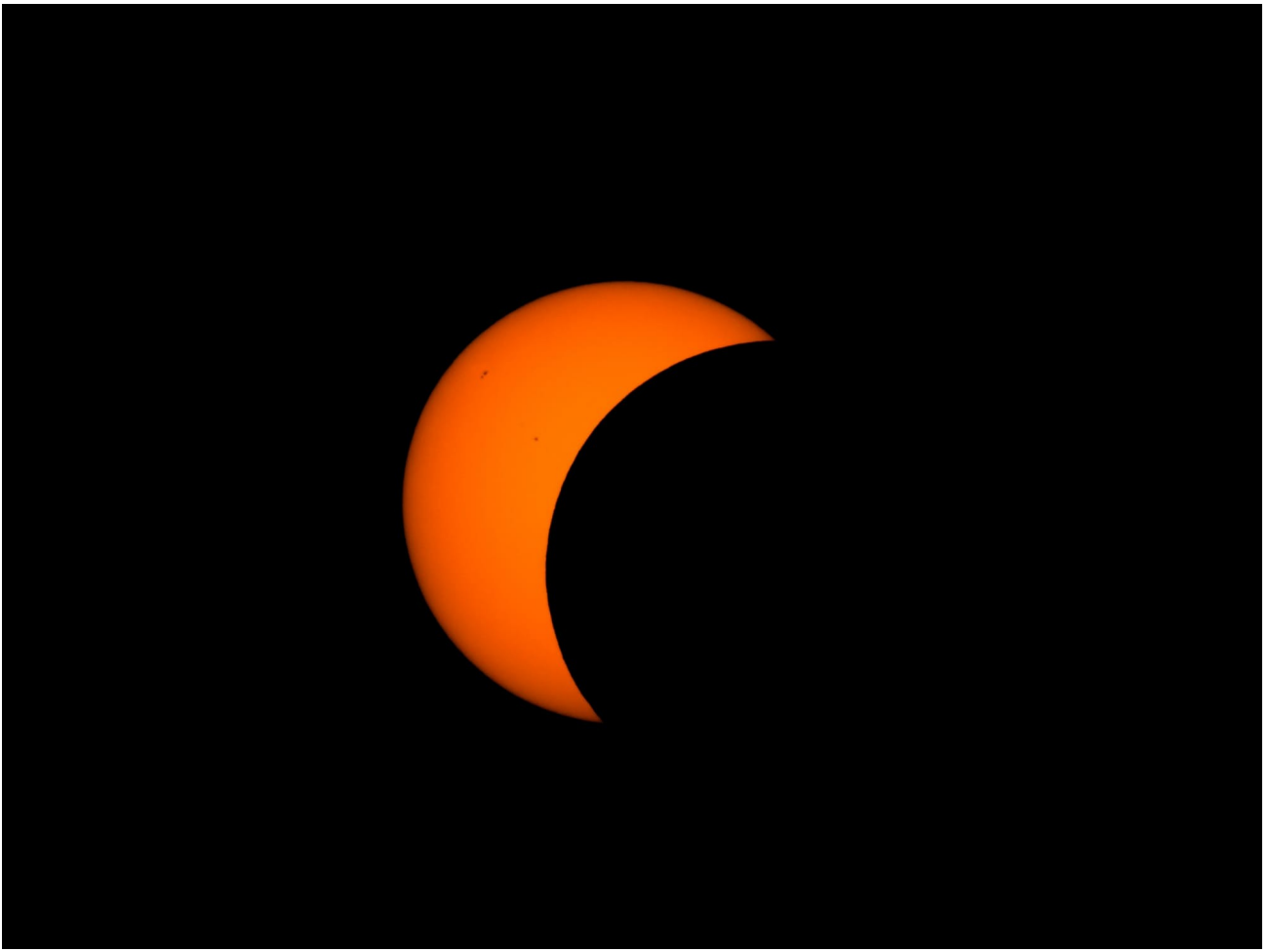
*Eclipse hunters assemble in Peñafiel, Spain (Rudi Zygadlo)*

The entry for Chile (2019) on his website — a good comparison for Spain, because of the low altitude — serves as a cautionary tale. They abandoned several picturesque spots around the Elqui Valley and Vicuna due to, variously, dust, wind, traffic noise and lack of facilities, and finally found a pier in a small fishing village close to the path's centre line. There was no wind and few people but, with only a few hours to go, mist had gathered over the sea. They did of course know about the proclaimed “eclipse city” of La Higuera, which was higher up and free of coastal mist or clouds, but it would come with tourists and noise. Should they stay or should they go? Half an hour later, the mist dispersed, and what followed was another sublime eclipse experience. But it was a near miss. They learned later that La Higuera had closed completely because too many people were trying to get in, and then many had become stuck in traffic in search of an alternative.

And what about the times when the gods simply refuse to smile, when the sun and the moon are totally eclipsed by cloud cover? Kryss pulls up the eclipse directory on his website; three of the 20 are coloured in red. “The first cloudy one was my seventh and that was of course England.” Talaat adds as a conciliatory footnote: “But we did meet Patrick Moore there.” I remember the 1999 solar eclipse vaguely. It was an 85% partial in Dumfries, Scotland. I remember my dad, peering through a Victorian-looking instrument — a sextant — but I can’t recall ever seeing the sun. “We had cloud in China, which was a really long one — five minutes,” laments Kryss, but the Faroe Islands was the biggest let down. The pair took a chance on a ferry to view totality and got stuck in a storm.

And the shortest total eclipse they have travelled for? “Uganda. 22 seconds,” Kryss replies in a flash. Was it worth it? I ask. “Of course.” Kryss clearly loves the technical aspects. He shows me charts and diagrams. He explains to me the phases. First contact — when the moon’s shadow first appears on the sun like a small bite of the apple and partiality begins. Bailey’s beads — the bright spots of sunlight that shine along the ragged edge of the moon just before second contact: the moment totality begins. During totality, you can see the corona and the prominences, tiny red specks made of dense hydrogen and helium plasma held in place by the sun’s powerful magnetic field loops. Third contact — the end of totality, marked by the diamond ring, the moment the sun becomes partially visible again. Fourth contact, when the shadow of the moon disappears and the eclipse is over.

There are historical dates on offer too. Longest totality in recorded history, 744 BC. 7 minutes 28 seconds. Oldest historical event, dated to the exact day by a total eclipse, 28 May 585 BC, when two armies in Anatolia were about to fight and a total eclipse came along and they got so terrified they signed a peace treaty. Then there is the story about the French astrophysicist Pierre Lena who chased an eclipse in a Concorde jet over Mauritania in 1973, managing to remain within totality for 74 minutes.



*This year's eclipse, captured in Spain by the author (Rudi Zygodlo)*

I ask Kryss if he can describe his emotional response to totality. “Sheer awe that the sun we depend on can be taken away so suddenly,” he says. “When planets are visible, it feels like we can see the Universe in its bare form. For me it's mainly awe and wonder. I understand the science too well to be frightened or superstitious about it. I have seen people cry during totality. Often I get told it's the most amazing thing they've ever seen.” Talaat comes back with a curveball. “To me it’s like a ballet dance between the Earth, the moon and the sun.”

Chasers often use erotic language to describe the phases. The first partial phase is like foreplay. Totality is like an orgasm — lasting anywhere between 20 seconds and around seven minutes, its theoretical maximum — and, for the postcoital smokers among us, third contact, marked by the diamond ring, the moment the sun becomes partially visible again, is sometimes referred to as “the cigarette moment”.

Seeing your first is referred to as losing your virginity. In her book about eclipse chasing, *Total Addiction*, Kate Russo states that while “there is no body-release during totality... it is an intellectual orgasm.” Audio recordings of people watching eclipses attest to this. You hear “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God...” You hear gasps and groans of pleasure. The sexual analogue should not be discounted but at the end of the day, eclipse chasing is surely a spectator sport.

Russo’s book is full of interviews with eclipse chasers, who say, in so many words, that no account of a total solar eclipse does justice to experiencing one first hand. “For anyone who hasn’t seen one, they don’t understand it at all,” says Rick, 59, New York. “There has never been a picture of an eclipse that makes you feel like you are sitting there. And there probably never will be.” From Sir Patrick Moore: “I knew more or less what to expect, but what I didn’t realise was how awe-inspiring it is. You can’t really describe it.”

These testimonies remind me of two other phenomena which people find too ineffable to truly relate: psychedelic trips and parenthood. Accounts of trips often invoke oneness with the universe or perhaps having the veil lifted — difficult, tedious even, to convey to the uninitiated. Reacting to news of my impending parenthood, friends will come out with contradictory superlatives, like “It’s the best, most exhausting, most energising, most terrifying, most beautiful thing... You have no idea what’s coming.” In both cases, one can learn as much from their glinting, tired eyes.

Outside the Japanese place, Kryss and Talaat stand under a gigantic advert hoarding for a new *Minions* film, which features dozens of disembodied eyeballs floating on a scarlet backdrop, peering down at us. In a last-ditch effort to figure out what to expect when you are expecting an eclipse, I ask if they agree with Russo’s assertion that “if everyone experienced a total solar eclipse, the world would be a better place”.

“Probably,” says Kryss. “I think knowledge of the Universe we live in, of history and travel (lots of it) helps make people more rounded and tolerant.”

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Meara and I arrive in Peñafiel on 10 August, a small town of about 5,000 in Castile y León, about 40 miles from the path's centre line. It is thanks to my mother-in-law Nalini that this trip is taking place. It is her birthday and she is something of an umbraphile herself, having seen her first total on 8 April, 2024, in the US. Cloud had been forecast for that day, but in the morning she heard that it was clear, "so at the last minute I just got in the car and drove to Lancaster, New Hampshire, and found a field where no one was around."

In Peñafiel, she has already scouted out several possible observation spots with my sister-in-law and her partner. The obvious vantage points are two hilltop castles, Castillo de Peñafiel and Castillo de Curiel, but they have been privately booked. Our spot will be about halfway up the hill of the former, a 200-metre-long fortification built in the 10th century which now houses a wine museum. Over dinner, Nalini tells us about a couple of London eclipse chasers she got chatting to in a Madrid museum a few days earlier. "It will be the man's 21st eclipse!" she says. This fact alone eliminates all improbability. I show her the picture I took of Kryss and Talaat, wearing eclipse specs under the Minions advert for confirmation.



*Meara, the author's wife, in Peñafiel (Rudi Zygadlo)*

There are various eclipse-chasing guests in our hotel. You can identify many of them from themed caps and T-shirts. The largest party is an alumni group from UCLA. We meet several by the pool. A couple from Minnesota, a sommelier from New York. “I was in Montreal for 2024,” says Mees from the Netherlands, treading water. “My wife is a virgin.” Everyone is friendly, but somewhat shifty when it comes to the issue of where to watch. We are too.

By 6pm on the day of, we are stationed on the infernal hillside, on a dusty path beneath pine trees and an immaculate sky. There are better vantage points but we have some degree of privacy here. We can hear others, but we can’t see them. The partial phase begins with a yodel at 7:34pm when the sun is eight degrees — or a fist’s length — above the horizon and my father-in-law produces a bottle of local white, which immediately turns warm in the glass. The nibble of the moon turns into a bite then into a crescent and I’m surprised how well my bottom-of-the-range bridge camera with a solar filter over the lens captures the partial phases. Later I’ll wish I never turned the thing on. Meara is quiet. Glowing. She is more pregnant than ever.

At 8:31pm, Baily’s beads fizz like effervescent bubbles around the hairline crescent, and then it’s as if all the light in the sky is suddenly sucked down the plug hole. I feel something akin to an orgasm, a rush, and my eyes fill with tears. The translucent corona is a white-gold halo — a hypnotic vortex drawing me into the black disk. I can see red prominences on the left-hand side, and the twinkle of Jupiter to the right. I sense the alignment of the sun, the moon and my cranium: that we’re locked in, that we are the objective lens and the sun is the eyepiece of a telescope 93 million miles long.

I could go on, but a niggling is rising up inside of me, an urge to capture the spectacle. I know I shouldn’t. I have learnt this stuff from Annie Dillard: “I assure you, if you send any shepherds a Christmas card on which is printed a three-by-three photograph of the angel of the Lord, the glory of the Lord, and a multitude of the heavenly host, they will not be so afraid. More fearsome things can come in envelopes. More moving photographs

than those of the sun's corona can appear in magazines. But I pray you will never see anything more awful in the sky."

As a million superior images of the very same spectacle are uploaded onto the internet, with less than a minute of totality left, I'm on my haunches fiddling with the camera, trying to line up a shot. My hands are shaking, the viewfinder is blurry, the image is a crime and it costs 15 seconds. The diamond ring flashes like a celestial camera right back at me and totality is over. Human cheers ring out from the town and hillside, and the forest screeches with crepuscular birdsong. I look around and see my wife and in-laws with golden faces, in states of elated lachrymosity. "What just happened?" someone asks. On some primal level I am relieved that daylight has returned ("The reappearance of the light is the same as the survival of the soul" — Victor Hugo) but, like Talaat and like many in Total Addiction, I want more.

Something I haven't anticipated, but a bonus of the low altitude, is that now, during the final partial phase, between third and fourth contact, we can look directly at the eclipsed sun as it shifts through shades of red, until its deep crimson mass submerges the horizon. The atmosphere is relaxing now. With less guilt, less blur and zero lessons learnt, I capture this phase with the camera and I message Kryss and Talaat who are in Burgos, 20 miles closer to the centre line, gifting them five more seconds of precious totality. Kryss attributes the golden hue of the corona to the low altitude and perhaps recent fires, making it "one of the most spectacular I've ever seen".

The next day, I log my stats into the eclipse-chaser-log.com log table — Eclipse Count 1, Totality 1, Time in totality 1 minute 38 seconds — and I'm thrilled to see that I'm not at the bottom. Having a place on the table does spark a desire to rack up my minutes, but surely that's just competitiveness, and, even if he passed away tomorrow, I doubt it's mathematically possible to surpass Donald Liebenberg and his 2 hours 27 minutes 41 seconds from 27 totals. Would I willingly intersect the path of totality again? Possibly. If the price was right, or, maybe if the eclipse were to come to me (UK, 2090, 2 minutes 24 seconds). I recall a piece of Talaat's

wisdom. “At the very least, it removes the problem of deciding on where to go on holiday.”

Has it changed me? Who knows. A couple of days after the eclipse, some of us go swimming in the river Duero and I do something out of character; I launch myself from a rope swing into the river.

Okay, it's not heroic, it's not particularly high, and I sort of fall rather than launch, but it's bolder than my usual tentative approach to these things. The day after that, in the Navarra region, smoke is blowing in across the valley from a fire somewhere and there is a thunderstorm. It is 38 degrees and the air makes us cough and our eyes sting. I wake up in the night and when I remove the sheet, my fingers emit a tiny bolt of lightning. I cry out and Meara wakes up and clutches her belly. Then she touches the sheet and electric light flashes from her fingers too. I kick off the sheet and the blue-white light ripples up my legs like a malfunctioning circuit board.

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