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A flock of Wood Storks in Costa Rica.



Courtesy Gary Seronik.

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Reflections

With all that's going on these days, we at TravelQuest often ask ourselves, "So, how will this global economic mess affect the world of travel?" Most of the time, this is an impossible question to answer.

However, just a couple of weeks ago we received a pretty clear message from readers like you in response to our e-list mailing announcing added availability on our 2009 eclipse trips to **China** and the **South Pacific**.

In the scores of replies we received from that e-mail, we acquired new bookings for both 2009 eclipse trips, along with expressions of interest in our soon-to-be-announced 2010 eclipse trips to **French Polynesia**, the **Cook Islands**, and most notably, **Easter Island**.

So, despite the worldwide financial woes, many of you are not canceling all of your travel plans. Instead, perhaps it's a choice between which destination to visit this year and which one to put off for another time. One thing is certain — a total solar eclipse happens only on a certain day at certain places across the globe.

Even though the economic future still seems uncertain, we know that some travel experiences can't be missed. We hope that an upcoming eclipse trip with TravelQuest will be one of yours!

Regards . . .



Aram Kaprielian

24 Hours at the Costa Rica Star Lodge



The grounds of our Costa Rica Star Lodge.

Story and images by Gary Seronik

Traveller expectations and desires come in all shapes and sizes. Upon arrival at our Star Lodge on the Gulf of Nicoya, some people like to quickly unpack and settle into a hammock for a little relaxation, while others can't wait to get trekking.

I've always felt the best thing about our annual [Costa Rica Southern Sky Fiesta](#) (the 6th annual tour begins February 21–28, 2009) is that you can do as little, or much as you want. I tend toward a more relaxing pace, but I know plenty of travelers who fill every minute with activity. Here's what a typical day looks like — at least a typical day for me.



A nicely camouflaged black iguana. After a long night under the stars, I usually get up pretty late. Perhaps I should be slightly embarrassed to admit this, but in five years of leading this tour, I've attended breakfast only once, and that was by accident. But from what I hear the food is good and the conversation is lively — often full of stories of the previous night's stargazing successes.

After breakfast, our local guide takes the early risers on a morning walk around the Star Lodge property to

view birds and other wildlife. And there's plenty to see. Even if you're only casually interested, you'll be impressed with the splendor of such avian show-offs as the Roseate Spoonbill or the White Ibis and the sight of iguanas and Howler monkeys.

Noon: Lunch Time

For me (and, I hasten to point out, a few other all-night stargazers), this is the first meal of the day. The menu changes daily, but it always consists of wholesome fresh food, all local, prepared just for us. You won't leave the table hungry, that's for sure. Meal times provide an opportunity to get to know each other, and after a few meals, everyone is on a first-name basis.

1:00 to 3:00 pm: Afternoon Activities

Depending on the day of the week, there's an off-site activity available. Of the several offered, my favorite is the boat ride to a nearby mangrove swamp. You never know what you're going to see, but it's a rare outing



The dining area.



during which we don't encounter some pretty exotic birds. How about the elusive Boat-billed Heron? Or the Mangrove Black Hawk? We've seen them and scores more. And it's always nice and refreshing to be out on the water, too.

In the afternoon, our local guide takes us out for a second walk of the day. Often we'll make our way to a pond on the property to see plenty of waterfowl and, more often than not, some of the neighborhood crocodiles. The reptiles are a safe distance away, but even so, you can certainly appreciate their fearsome appearance and impressive size.

5:00 pm: Time for Dinner

Night comes quickly in the tropics, so we have dinner early enough that everyone has time to get their equipment ready for a night under the stars. Again, lots of fresh, local food, simply prepared, is on offer.

I often present informal post-dinner talks on a variety of subjects.

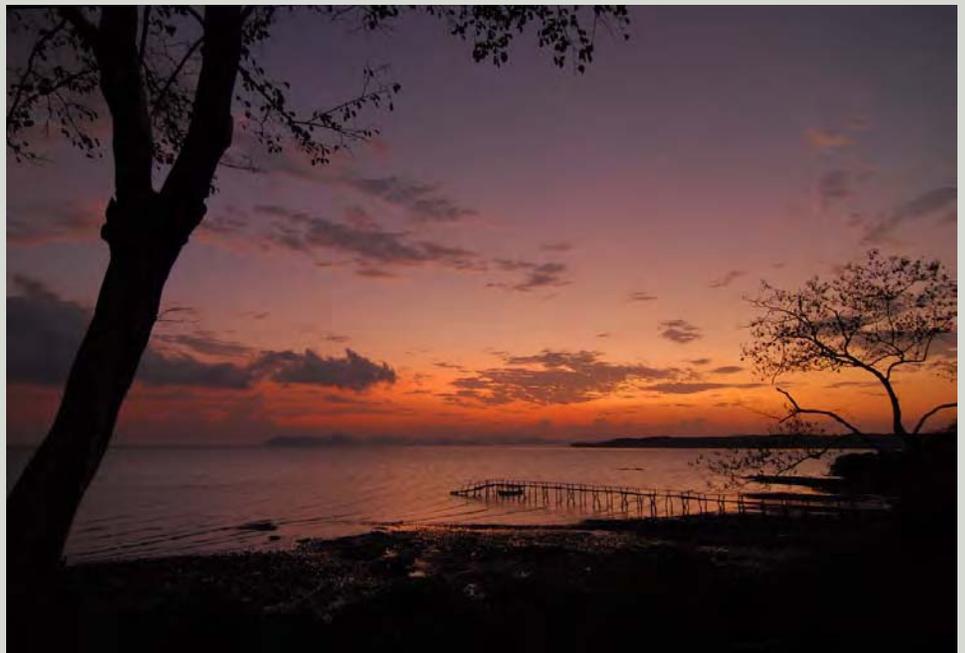
We go over stargazing basics (such as finding your way around the night sky), introductory photography, and binocular stargazing. Questions are encouraged, and we usually have a lively session while coffee is served.

Dusk to Dawn: Observing

This is what we came for — the stargazing. And the skies at our Star Lodge rarely disappoint. Location is

Above: A small sample of some of the wildlife seen on our walks. From left to right: Roseate Spoonbill, a Motmot, and a Howler monkey. Below: Sunset over the Gulf of Nicoya heralds the start of another fine night of observing.

everything, and our latitude (a mere 10° north of the equator) affords us a great view of many legendary southern-sky sights. We soak up views of the Southern Cross, the wondrous





Eta Carinae Nebula, the shimmering splendor of the Milky Way, and the sky's finest globular star cluster — Omega Centauri.

But our location has one other important advantage: long nights. We get to enjoy nearly 10 hours of star-filled darkness. This means we see almost a year's worth of constellations march across the sky in a single night — from the groupings of late autumn in the early evening, to the stars of summer in the early morning. Indeed, the nights are so long and filled with so many fascinating sights that I always have to caution guests to pace



Above: Part of the superb southern Milky Way stretching from the Southern Cross (left) to the Eta Carinae Nebula (right).

Below: A fine sight in binoculars is the Eta Carinae Nebula and its surroundings themselves, so they don't get worn out during the first night or two.

I usually take the time to give a couple of laser-guided tours of the night sky. Although scheduled in advance, our sky tours are informal. Usually we convene by the swimming pool and settle into reclining chairs as we explore the sky with binoculars. This is a great way to get to know the sky if you're new to stargazing, or just new to the southern sky.

My day often ends at dawn as the morning birds start singing and the Howler monkeys start, well, howling. It's time for bed — after all, I have to get a few hours of shut-eye so that I don't sleep through lunch!

There are a few spaces available on the next [Southern Sky Fiesta](#), which starts February 21, 2009. Gary Seronik is a Sky & Telescope contributing editor, author of [Binocular Highlights](#), and a long-time night-sky aficionado. This will be his sixth trip as tour leader to Costa Rica.

Making Memories

If you're considering doing some nighttime photography (such as on TravelQuest's southern-sky trip to Costa Rica or TQ's aurora-watching tour to Iceland), take a tripod. Otherwise, don't bother. It's often more trouble than it's worth.

These days most digital cameras have IS (Image Stabilization) or VR (Vibration Reduction). Such systems use sensors to stabilize either a lens element or the image-sensor itself.

As an aside, if you're buying a camera and IS is important to you, make sure you understand how the system stabilizes the image. You want something that is hardware based and doesn't just boost the ISO to get a faster shutter speed. Phrases like "anti-shake" or "anti-blur" likely mean the stabilization is *not* done optically via the hardware.

What IS gives you is the ability to shoot deep-twilight scenes without a tripod and still have them come out reasonably sharp. But even with IS, you're not going to be hand-holding a late-evening shot at ISO 100! You *will* have to boost your ISO, but don't just automatically bump it to 800 or 1600; you'll likely end up with too much noise in the image. First, try a couple of shots at a slower ISO, then boost the ISO and shoot again. And don't discard any image until you've checked it on your computer screen.

— P.D.

A Spectacular Solar Eclipse

Story by David Levy;
images by David and
Wendee Levy

The total eclipse of the Sun we saw from Novosibirsk on August 1, 2008, was my 77th eclipse, including everything from eight total solar eclipses to many penumbral lunar eclipses. However, in a crucial way this eclipse was the most important I've ever seen, for in the 2 minutes and 23 seconds of totality, it brought me back to an earlier time and place.

This eclipse, it turns out, is from the same long-term eclipse cycle — Saros 126 — that produced a total eclipse almost a century earlier, on June 8, 1918. This was, of course, long before I was born, but at the time Leslie C. Peltier was only 18 years old and living on a farm near Delphos, Ohio. On that clear afternoon Peltier, who would become one of the 20th century's most accomplished telescopic observers, set up his 2-inch refractor in a field to observe the eclipse. "The shadow would be coming along quickly now; it might, right then, be crossing Indiana," he wrote in his autobiography *Starlight Nights*.

The Onrushing Shadow

Almost a century later, I would be thinking much the same thing. The shadow would indeed be coming along quickly now; it might, right now, be crossing the Arctic Circle on its way southward into Siberia. It made me think of how fortunate we were,



On the beach at the Ob Lake (also known as the Ob Sea) near Novosibirsk, Russia. From left to right: me, Wendee Levy, Bobbi Gershon, and Lawrence Gershon. To my immediate left is my telescope, Minerva.

having crossed half the world to see this great sight, but then almost losing it due to the previous night's clouds and rain. The sky, still clouded in the morning, began to show a few spots of blue as we waited in Novosibirsk's town square for our 11:00 am meeting with our bus. Just looking at weather maestro Jay Anderson, I could tell he was worried. Hopeful, but worried.

Just before 11:00, a group of reporters happened by. Could we interview you, they asked, about why you traveled so far for the eclipse? I had to decline, because it would delay our bus. But then my wife Wendee came by and whispered something to them. She had arranged that if they could interview me at 11:00 sharp, and keep it short, the bus would wait for me. Later, as we proceeded to our

eclipse site on the reservoir beach just south of Novosibirsk, the sky continued to clear.

Just prior to first contact, I decided to test the audio system that would carry my voice, through many pairs of headphones, to the waiting crowd. Thanks to this special feature, I could actually offer a play-by-play description of the eclipse to those who might want one. So I tested. "If you can hear me, say 'Perestroika,'" I announced, reminding them of Gorbachev's 1980s restructuring plan. Suddenly from all over the beach the crowd roared "PERESTROIKA!" I think it worked.

Before first contact between the eastward moving Moon and the Sun, the cumulus clouds thickened, then thinned once again. When the in-bound partial phase reached 60%, I



was brought back to Delphos again, and thought of Peltier's words: "At mid-eclipse I turned away and looked about. Everything I saw, the nearby fields, the distant vistas, all seemed wrapped in some unearthly early twilight. The sky seemed darker — shadows faint and indistinct."

Our sky continued to darken, first gradually and then rather suddenly. With the partial eclipse now exceeding 90%, the Sun was a tiny, thin crescent. In the northwest the sky was dimming rapidly, as if someone was turning a huge celestial dimmer switch.

The Onset of Totality

At this point I asked the people to remove their eclipse glasses and look to the west to see the darkening, then replace their glasses and check the progress of the Moon across the rapidly thinning Sun. I repeated the exercise — glasses off, look to the north; glasses on, look at the Sun. By now the darkness was coming in waves. Glasses on, notice the Sun as a tiny straight line; glasses off, look north, and, with glasses still off, look at the Sun.

The emergence of a diamond ring brought everyone to their feet, and then as the ring faded during the next few seconds the Sun simply vanished. In its place was a jeweled crown.

This totality proved to me that eclipses are much more poetry than science. The oval corona and a couple of small orange prominences were beautiful beyond description and belief. The total phase might have lasted 2 minutes

and 23 seconds, but during those precious moments time abruptly stopped. The image of that lovely corona, the twilight sky, and the eclipsed Sun flanked by Mercury and Venus, will never leave my memory.

The eclipse was the highlight of a tour through Russia and Siberia that was expertly planned and carried out by Aram Kaprielian and TravelQuest. What a beautiful job they did! They arranged an adventure that brought us into the land of the Czars, back to the era of Soviet communism, and forward to the dawn of today's new era. We stopped at a Kremlin secretly planning an invasion of Georgia; a Kremlin still dogged by its troubled past. But on this one day, during these few clear hours (the sky clouded over again an hour after the eclipse ended), Russia held its breath.

Epilogue

After returning home I studied the 1918 precursor a little more. "All over America the eclipse was ended," Peltier wrote. "Along the narrow track of totality astronomers from all over

the world packed up their precious plates and prepared to leave for home. . . . For the most part they left well pleased with the performance though, as always, some had been unfortunate in their choice of seats along the lengthy aisle. And as they started homeward not one in all that far-flung audience could know that this was just an intermission and that the show they had come so far to see would be a double feature."

In the darkening sky of 1918, writes Peltier, "right there in front of me — squarely in the center of the Milky Way — was a bright and blazing star!" It has been a long time since our world was treated to an exploding star, or nova, like the one on the evening of June 8, 1918.

Ninety years later, on the night of August 1, 2008, no bright new stars graced the sky. But watching this magnificent eclipse took me back to a different era, an easier time, and an inside view of astronomical history.

David Levy has discovered 22 comets (nine from his Jarnac Observatory), is the science editor for Parade magazine, and has authored numerous astronomy books. This was his eighth total solar eclipse.

Travel to Totality

Journey with TravelQuest to witness the July 22, 2009, total solar eclipse — with the longest duration of totality this century!

You can get eclipsed in China, the land of the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the panda. Or rendezvous with the Moon's shadow in the South Pacific aboard the 6-star luxury ship, Paul Gauguin.

Whether it's China or the South Pacific, don't delay; space on these tours is limited.

On the Road

Nobody wants to get sick on a tour, but it happens. Still, if all you pick up is a cold, consider yourself lucky. So to avoid anything worse, here are a few actions you can take before you leave home and things to remember while you're on the road.

Before You Go

If you're traveling beyond the US, Canada, or Europe, you may need a vaccine or two to protect you from diseases at your destination. Before you go, check the [Centers for Disease Control](#) to find out which vaccinations (if any) you need for your trip. But don't wait until the last minute. Most vaccines take time to become effective and some must be given over a period of days or even weeks.

When packing, include enough prescription medication to last a few days beyond the scheduled end of the trip (and use the original containers if possible). Bring antihistamines (or an EpiPen for emergencies) an anti-diarrheal (such as Imodium), a basic pain reliever, and sunscreen.

While You Travel

The bacteria on the "far side" of the world are different from the bacteria in our home town, which is why we often get sick when we travel. Of course, no matter where you are, E. coli and salmonella are not your friends.

So keep in mind two simple rules when you travel in truly foreign lands: — If you can't peel it, cook it, or boil it, don't eat it. This means peel your fruit, stay away from raw food (vegetables included), and stick to tea and coffee (made with boiled water).

— Stay hydrated, but avoid the local water. So no ice in your drinks and do not use tap water to brush your teeth.

Staying hydrated can be a challenge, and it usually means drinking bottled water. But beware. There are often few controls on bottled water in distant lands, so it's possible that a bottle could be filled with regular tap water and sold as bottled water. Your best defense: buy bottles only from your hotel (or other 4- or 5-star hotels) or the restaurants where you eat — not from street vendors. And make sure the seal on the cap isn't broken.

— P.D.

Write to Us

If you've tried to e-mail me at the address below, I'm sorry to report that it was out of commission for some time. However, the address has recently been restored to good health, so please try again.

Travel tips for "On the Road" and photo hints for "Making Memories" are easy to submit. Just jot them down and fire them off to me. If you have a memorable travel tale to tell, we'd love to hear about it. Write it as a Word document (try to keep it to about 600 words in length), include one or more photos, and send the story and images to me as e-mail attachments.

Your tips, hints, travel tales, and any comments you have about *Travel Quest* will (now) reach me at: editor@TQ-International.com.

Paul Deans, editor

The logo for TravelQuest International features the word "TRAVELQUEST" in a bold, white, sans-serif font, with "International" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it. The text is set against a dark teal background that has a white circular shape on the right side, partially overlapping the text.

Upcoming Adventures

[Costa Rica: Southern Sky Fiesta](#)

Our arid coastal observing site at 10° north latitude is far from light pollution and offers spectacular views of the southern sky's many splendors. *February 21 to 28, 2009.*

[Eclipse 2009](#)

On July 22, 2009, a total eclipse of the Sun will sweep across India, China, and the Pacific Ocean.

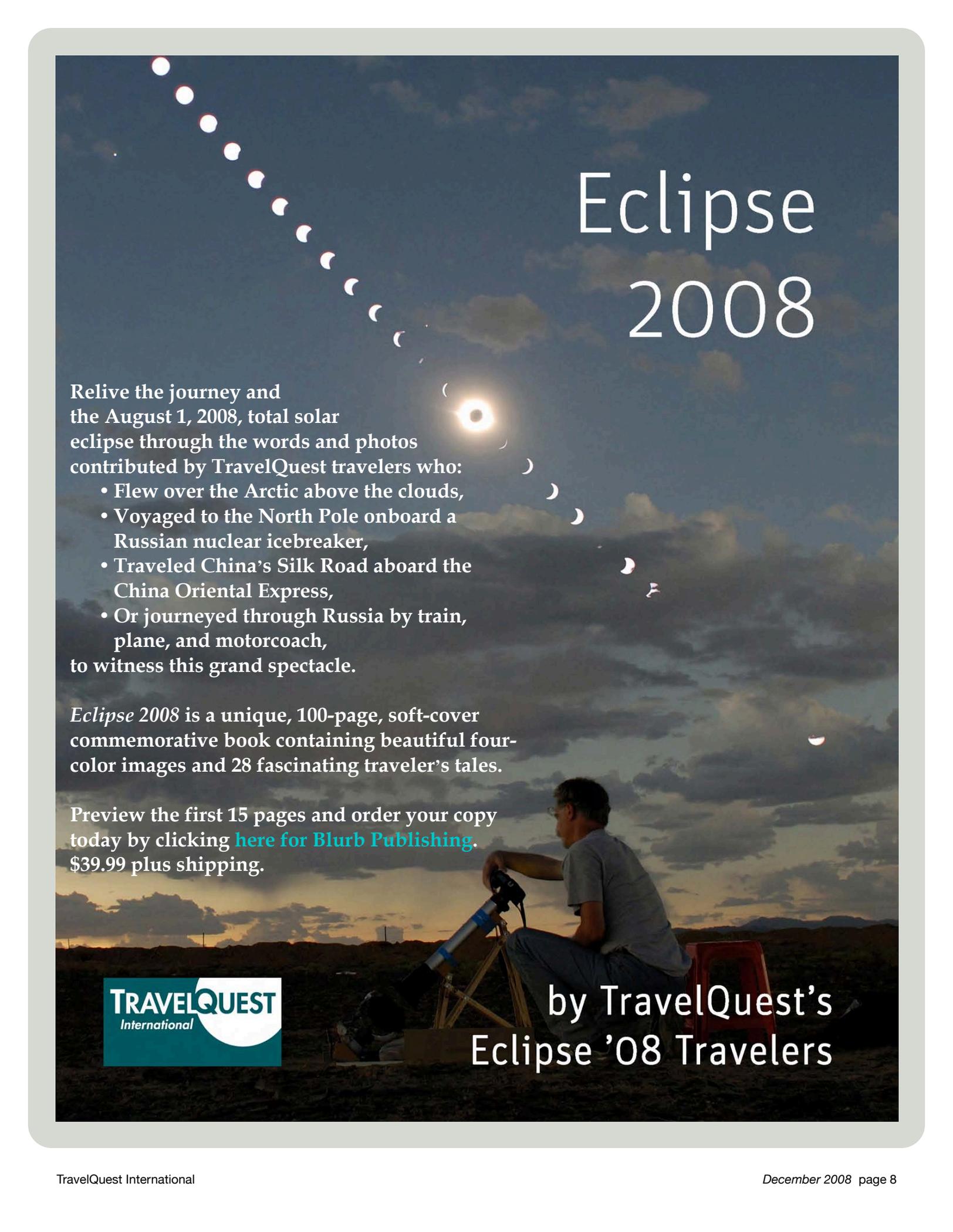
[China: In the Footsteps of Emperors](#)

Join us in China as we explore the wonders of ancient Beijing and modern Shanghai. Then travel to our centerline viewing location where we'll stand in the Moon's shadow for almost 6 minutes. *July 15 to 23, 2009.*

[South Pacific Solar Eclipse Cruise](#)

Discover the beauty of the islands of the South Pacific, and then rendezvous with 3 minutes and 26 seconds of totality aboard Regent Seven Seas' 320-guest, virtually all-inclusive, 6-star luxury ship, *Paul Gauguin*. (After totality, watch the 27% eclipsed Sun set into the ocean!) *July 15 to 29, 2009.*

To learn more about our other tours, please visit our website: www.OnlineTravelQuest.com.



Eclipse 2008

Relive the journey and the August 1, 2008, total solar eclipse through the words and photos contributed by TravelQuest travelers who:

- Flew over the Arctic above the clouds,
 - Voyaged to the North Pole onboard a Russian nuclear icebreaker,
 - Traveled China's Silk Road aboard the China Oriental Express,
 - Or journeyed through Russia by train, plane, and motorcoach,
- to witness this grand spectacle.

Eclipse 2008 is a unique, 100-page, soft-cover commemorative book containing beautiful four-color images and 28 fascinating traveler's tales.

Preview the first 15 pages and order your copy today by clicking [here for Blurb Publishing](#). \$39.99 plus shipping.

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Eclipse '08 Travelers