

Destination: Totality

By Kristina Merola

It started months ago.

Me: "We haven't gotten away on our own since we had children." (note: my daughter will be 10 in September). "Let's go see the eclipse!"

Husband: "Ok."

We started the non-planning. We wouldn't book a hotel anywhere because of the chance of uncooperative weather. We just asked the grandparents to babysit for the 3 days we planned on being gone. (We are in their debt!)

At 9:00 p.m. Saturday, 41 hours to totality, we had to decide where we would go. We wanted to avoid the traffic jams expected up and down the I-95 corridor, so we would head inland. I hadn't been to Tennessee. Tennessee sounded drivable (12 + hours). The weather and cloud cover forecast looked good. We decided to drive to Tennessee.

How would we decide where to go in Tennessee? Ideally, it would be a smaller venue, but would there be any available space along the line of totality? From the news, it sounded like it would be standing room only. Just from the map, I picked the town of Springfield, TN - it looked large enough to have amenities we would need, but small enough to not draw too much of a crowd, and it was close to the line of the longest duration of the totality at 2 minutes and 40 seconds.

At 4:00 a.m. Sunday, 34 hours to totality, we were up. We stopped by Wawa for coffee (we wouldn't be near one for a couple of days and I needed my fix), and we were off.

I started checking off the states as we drove into them: Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia.

About 6 hours in, Husband: "I may want a shower tonight..."

Me, with slight panic: "I thought we were living out of the jeep. I heard everything was booked. I'll look..."

Bowling Green, KY, which was within the path of totality, on the way, one hour outside of Springfield, TN, had motel rooms available for \$1500 a night. Nope. I looked further out – Louisville, KY or Lexington, KY. Both had rooms at reasonable rates and were 3 hours from Springfield. Lexington was on the way and looked like a fine place to rest and shower. The town was the perfect stop, with a number of great places to choose from for a nice dinner and places to mingle with the locals afterwards. Everywhere we went, we heard discussions about "totality".

Monday morning, we were up again early to beat the crowds to our destination. We drove into Springfield, TN, at 8:00 a.m., 6 hours to totality. The town's square was blocked off for the viewing party they would be having. I looked around for an open space to view the eclipse. The town was cute, and it would be great to hang out with the locals, but I wanted more sky. I went onto Google Earth looking for green space nearby. There was a park five minutes down the road... hopefully, with big sky views. We passed the forest, then corn fieldsI was getting excited.... then turned into the park – a few large

trees, a pond, a historical log cabin, and open areas... and less than 10 cars in the parking lot, each with spotting scopes, telescopes, and chairs looking in the direction of the sun. PERFECT SPOT!!! We backed in and met our fellow viewers.

The Springfield Director of Parks and Recreation, Terry Martin, was talking to everyone (with super southern friendliness) "Where y'all from?" Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Ontario, Connecticut. Throughout the rest of our time I would also see license plates from Quebec and Texas. After some small talk with my fellow travelers, I started walking the park looking for the best vantage point. After thirty minutes of walking, triangulating, and analyzing the park and sun positions, I came back to the car.

Husband: "Let's go sit under that tree."

Me: "Ok."

And under that tree we stayed for 5 hours, going back and forth from the car for food, drinks, and other equipment, mostly people watching, sun watching, and waiting for pictures from Oregon.

Me: "'Sky Map' has the moon already in front of the sun."

Husband: "I don't see anything yet. Fix the phone by moving it in a figure 8."

Me: "It still hasn't changed."

Husband: "It must be off a little."

Me: "I'm going to try the Pop Tart wrapper, just to see if it works."

I go out to the car to get the wrapper, leaving my precious glasses under the tree. I turn around and Husband is staring at the sun with his glasses on – the eclipse had started. I ran back to the blanket and picked up my glasses: a tiny piece was missing from the right side of the sun. The excitement started to build again. We would sit like this for the next few hours, moving from binoculars to cell phones, to camera, back to glasses. (FYI: The Pop Tart wrapper on top of the camera as a filter does NOT work – it lets in too much light). Over that time, 200+ people had quietly funneled into the park, some individual groups, college students, and a lot of families with blankets, glasses, and pin-hole cameras (card board boxes). An hour into the eclipse, one of the nearby children looked up and yelled, "It looks like Pac-Man!"

The sun slowly disappeared behind the moon.

About 10 minutes before totality, the light had not changed at all, even though just a sliver of the sun could be seen through the glasses. My thoughts were of earlier societies, before protective glasses, before the science of astronomy, and how they would not know what would be coming, since the dark moon could not be observed in the sky beforehand and it gave no hint it was creeping directly in front of the sun.

Finally, it started to darken. Not the color of a sunset, but a disconcerting, indescribable color, the grass and tree leaves turning a reddish ting. I turn to Husband, who also now has a weird red glow. The horizons were still light blue and pink, the shadow felt like it was slowly darkening just on top of us. A strange feeling overcame the crowd collectively. Some described it as feeling jittery, like having butterflies in their stomach, or just feeling "off". It felt to me like I was a bit light headed and I couldn't

stand still. There was no logic behind the physical responses. The feeling was so fascinating, but you also couldn't concentrate on any one thought for very long. Crickets started chirping loudly as it darkened and the parking lot lights came on. The once-quiet crowd started buzzing around, excitedly. Someone that still had their wits about them shouted "30 seconds" and we all stared upward as the slight fingernail of the sun disappeared behind the glowing blue/black moon. "Glasses off!"

Totality!

The once-quiet crowd started clapping, yelling, hooting, and whooping.

It was amazing. Awesome. Mesmerizing.

For over two minutes, the sun was behind the moon and the corona danced around the outer edges in the beautifully eerie darkness.

After basking in the feeling and sights and sounds of it all, another call from in front of us: "thirty seconds" – thank goodness someone was still in touch with reality. In my head, I started the countdown: ...5...4...3...2...1...

Glasses back on.

The diamond ring! The sun peaked from behind the moon with a glorious diamond ring glow.

More whooping and awe from the crowd.

Then, it was in the shape of a fingernail, again.

And the crowd was quiet, again, reflecting on the past five minutes as the light slowly came back to the final yell in the distance of "Let there be light!"

In the experience I have bonded with strangers from around North America in a park in Tennessee without saying a single word, just smiling and nodding to everyone as we packed up and headed back to the car.

It took us 17 hours to drive straight back home, in many areas coasting at less than 20 miles per hour on the highway with fellow eclipsers.

At the end of such a long journey:

Husband: "Worth it!"

Me: "Start planning for 2024."

Husband: "Ok."



