

1991 SOLAR ECLIPSE EXPEDITION

THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

26 June 1991

Dear Expedition Member:

This is the final mailing to all Expedition members before the big day. Many of you have been calling over the past 10 days to enquire about the current status of the Expedition, and I am pleased to report that all of our planning is proceeding better than we could ever have hoped for.

JUNE SITE PREVIEW TRIP

On Sunday, 23 June I returned from one week in Mexico with J. Randy Attwood, a member of the Solar Eclipse Committee. We held extensive meetings with customs in Puerto Vallarta, government officials in La Paz, the bus company and hotel representatives, and our ground handlers in both Puerto Vallarta and Los Cabos. All of our arrangements are now firmly in place, and we have received excellent cooperation from everyone in Mexico.

On Tuesday, 18 June Randy and I spent the entire day travelling north from Puerto Vallarta toward the centre line on the mainland. We located several excellent back-up observing sites, including a soccer field and the University in the City of Tepic. Our preferred observing site, however, is a schoolyard on the coast about half-way between the towns of San Blas and Santa Cruz, immediately to the west of Tepic. Our observations over three days on the Mexican mainland confirmed that there is a significant build-up of cumulus clouds in late morning over the interior, with the result that any observing site that is not directly on the coast would be in danger of being clouded out during the eclipse. Nonetheless, there is only a very small possibility that we will remain on the mainland, given the firm arrangements and excellent weather in Baja California.

You will be interested to know that we searched the skies in vain for even one cloud during our three days in Baja California. The temperatures were surprisingly moderate (30 - 36 degrees C.), and the humidity was very low. We visited the Santiago soccer stadium, our primary observing site, three times, including once at night. We are even more convinced than ever that it is absolutely the best observing site in Baja California. We were told that many groups have applied for permission to use the soccer stadium in the past two years, but that all of them were turned down because we had made our reservation in July 1989. The soccer stadium is ours exclusively.

We signed the ground services contract with the eclipse coordinating committee in La Paz. At the Santiago stadium the government will be providing security personnel, a nurse, drinking water, washroom facilities and a tent for shade. This will be a slightly rigorous trip, but arrangements are in place to make it as comfortable as possible.

THE PLAZA VALLARTA HOTEL AND MEXICAN CURRENCY

We stayed for two nights at the same hotel in Puerto Vallarta where the Expedition will be staying on the evening of Wednesday the 10th. It is a very good hotel with excellent ocean swimming and a very large and modern swimming pool. Souvenir and other shopping is available immediately across the road in a shopping centre. Currency exchange for both Canadian and U.S. dollars (cash and traveller's cheques) is available both in the hotel and in several private outlets located nearby. Because the Mexican peso is a freely convertible currency on world markets, there is virtually no black market for the currency, and the best and worst exchange rates (the latter always found in hotels) vary by only about three percent. The current exchange rate for the Canadian dollar is approximately 2,500 pesos and for the U.S. dollar approximately 2,990 pesos.

REMINDER RE: REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

We remind you that, in order to enter Mexico, you must have either a valid passport or a birth certificate with photo identification such as a driver's licence with your photograph on it. Remember that if minors are travelling without both parents, the form of Consent that was provided to you

with the 7 May 1991 mailing must be completed by the parent(s) who is (are) not travelling with the minor, and notarized. If you do not have this documentation, you will not be allowed to enter Mexico, and in all likelihood you will not be allowed to board the aircraft in Toronto. THIS IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY ENTIRELY.

HEALTH INSURANCE

We very strongly recommend that you purchase health insurance (Blue Cross or equivalent) for the three days (10 - 12 July) during all or part of which you will be out of Canada. While food and water are of high quality where we will be travelling and we do not anticipate any medical problems of any kind, we cannot imagine a more unpleasant fate (other than being clouded out) than to be stuck in a foreign hospital without medical insurance. The cost for such insurance is low, and it is well worth it.

MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS

Among Puerto Vallarta, La Paz and Los Cabos, we saw at least 50 different types of eclipse T-shirts. The Baja government has produced more than 100 different kinds of eclipse souvenirs, and there will be a stand at the Santiago soccer stadium for you to purchase such souvenirs as you wish. It seems that solar eclipses are much more commercial than scientific events.

There is no electrical power at any of our observing sites. If you require power for your equipment, you must bring it yourself. The ground surface of the stadium is flat and of good quality, but it is a little dusty and there are stones. Open-toed sandals are completely inappropriate. You should have running shoes or equivalent, together with at least one extra pair of thick socks. We will be at the observing site for up to six hours. You may wish to bring a wash cloth to wash your face and hands with the available running water, or moistened cloths such as Handi-wipes, to make yourself more comfortable.

Airport x-ray machines, especially outside Canada and the U.S.A., are of high power, and can ruin photographic film. You should either pack your photographic film in lead bags (which can be purchased at any good quality photo supply store) or ask for your film to be checked by hand. Do not rely on assurances by airport personnel that x-rays do not affect low-speed film. Not all airport security personnel are experienced and knowledgeable photographers.

INTERACTION WITH MEXICANS

Without exception we have found the Mexicans with whom we have been dealing to be courteous, friendly and helpful. We are their guests, and they are allowing us the privilege of using their facilities and their country of observe this wonderful event. You will not find conditions and practices in Mexico to be the same as here at home. That is one of the charms and educational aspects of travelling abroad. The pace of life is slower, and any irritation or frustration that we may feel as a result of the different way of life must be considered our cultural problem, and not theirs.

We are ambassadors both of our own countries and for scientists and astronomers generally. We know that you will be courteous, cooperative and friendly. Try to use at least some Spanish phrases. The language is quite similar to French and English, and it is not at all difficult to learn enough Spanish to order at a restaurant, say please and thank you, etc. As we appreciate the efforts of foreigners who try to use English, so the Mexicans very much appreciate our attempts to use their language.

We look forward to seeing all of you in two weeks under clear skies!

Yours very truly,



Michael S. F. Watson
Expedition Leader
RASC 1991 Solar Eclipse
Expedition

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