

11th August 1999: Millions marvel at total eclipse



Up to 350 million people in Europe and Asia have witnessed the last total solar eclipse of the century. The phenomenon began over the Atlantic, a few hundred miles east of Boston, North America. The only part of mainland Britain to witness totality - the full blacking out of the sun by the moon - was Cornwall in south-west England.

Cloudy skies mean spectators there were unable to see the full effect, but the spectacle was still dramatic.

The temperature dropped and darkness fell in Falmouth at 1111 BST (1011 GMT). TV astronomer Patrick Moore, watching in Falmouth, described it as a "strange, weird experience".

Torrential downpour

Hundreds of people who gathered on the Isles of Scilly were the first to witness the eclipse. After Britain the eclipse was seen throughout Europe and Asia. Across the Channel in northern France there were clear skies as there were in Munich, Germany.

But at the moment of totality, a torrential downpour spoiled the view.



The streets of Ramnicu Valcea, the south-central city in Romania -where totality could be seen the longest - were crammed with spectators. In Egypt, Muslims shut themselves away on the orders of clerics but Jordan and Syria declared a national holiday. Spectators in Pakistan and Bangladesh suffered the same fate as those in the UK, having their views obscured by clouds.

The eclipse will lead to greater scientific understanding, largely because its track across Europe and south Asia allowed astronomers many vantage points with clear skies. During an eclipse scientist are able to measure the effect of the sun on the Earth's atmosphere and observe the violent magnetic storms in outer atmosphere of the sun - the corona.

