

Turkey Eclipses India

Suzan Crane and her rag-tag posse from Goa attended a solar eclipse, which was the high point of an entrancing festival.

March 20 – Oblivious to Delhi’s daily madness swirling around him, Michael is charging down the main bazaar of Pahar Ganj waving his hands like a lunatic. “I’ve got them,” he shouts, displaying airline tickets with the exuberance of someone holding a winning lottery number. Down the road a large crew is gathered, excitedly discussing the imminent event. Half of Goa, it seems, is in India’s capital preparing – not for the traditional post-winter journey north – but for a mass exodus west. In a few days we’ll all be in Turkey for the week-long SoulClipse Festival, where India-heads will join 8,000 other global partiers outside the Mediterranean city of Antalya to experience the mind-blowing phenomenon of a total solar eclipse.

March 23 – The flight from India has landed and a motley crew litters Istanbul airport like so much lost luggage. Despite concerns about officials scrutinising excess baggage, everyone emerges from the terminal unscathed and untaxed. “That was surprisingly easy,” a relieved Joolz, who is packing 500 pairs of Aladdin pants, observes. Despite warnings that Turkish customs would be watching for SoulClipse attendees carrying stuff to sell, no one gave us a second look, which was strange considering *how* we looked – all dreadlocked, tattooed and pierced, bindis affixed to foreheads, bohemian garb draping our bodies.

With six hours to spare before transiting, my crew visits the legendary Blue Mosque. Istanbul, I note, is a clean and picturesque city. Even the tourist hub of Sultanahmet – teeming with overpriced restaurants and souvenir touts – is relaxed compared to Delhi’s inherent chaos. Over the next two months, further exploration of this (mostly) Muslim nation will confirm my initial impression. Although more costly than India, Turkey – uniquely situated in both Asia and Europe – is a scenic and historically splendid country, and the people are friendly and gracious.

March 26 – It’s pissing down rain when we arrive at the festival site. As vendors, we set up camp in a fenced area behind the marketplace. Hemmed in like caged animals, we have views of makeshift buildings rather than the crystal river fringing the grounds. Regardless, our market ghetto – mostly sellers from India, Israel, Japan and a few from Turkey – quickly coalesces.

March 27 – The gates open and revelers pour in. Colorful tents sprout from the sludge like tulips in a trough. It continues to rain.

March 28 – On day two the main

stage collapses, which thankfully results in no injuries. But the mishap creates confusion among the DJ schedules and diversions on the smaller stage. People are mired in muck but spirits remain high, partly due to the preponderance of drugs, despite the relentless downpour.

March 29 – The rain magically abates. The sun rises and shines. Everyone wanders about aimlessly. By 2pm all eyes are on the sky. Some people head for the surrounding hills, but the majority are assembled at the second stage. Anticipation and a palpable sense of excitement bond the thousands gathered here. Psy trance provides the soundscape and while a few dance, most stand around waiting. In a matter of minutes, we will be among the relatively few on earth to witness this remarkable event, having placed ourselves in the narrow “path of totality” which coursed from Brazil, through the Middle East and Africa, and into Turkey.

A collective gasp erupts as the gauze of a dwarfed sun creates an eerie midday twilight. The DJ kills the music and everyone dons protective eyewear. An ominous hush descends upon the crowd as a luminous ring (the sun’s corona) radiates in an otherwise darkened sky, the new moon having completely blocked the fiery orb. That was the spectacular “moment of totality,” the climax, when the moon’s *darm umbral* shadow falls onto the earth’s surface. The sun gingerly re-emerges from behind its lunar shroud and the sky gradually brightens. Suddenly it is daytime again. Still silent, the crowd stands in awe, at once spent and elated, unified in a shared experience that carries over into the remaining days of the festival.

From start to finish, the eclipse lasted less than four minutes. But the memory of the spectacular sight will last a lifetime.

