

Eclipse Thrills Thousands of Sky Gazers

A solar eclipse thrilled thousands of sky gazers on remote Arctic islands on Friday but clouds disappointed some viewers of a rare celestial show that was also partly visible for millions in Europe, Africa and Asia.

People cheered and clapped as the moon blocked the sun for about 2.5 minutes under clear skies on the icy Norwegian islands of Svalbard, where tourists had been warned of polar bears after an attack on Thursday and risks of frostbite.

But clouds masked the sky over Torshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands further south, the only other place where the eclipse was visible from land as it swept across the Atlantic.

"It was overcast, there was rain and wind. You could see nothing. It was a disappointment for everybody," said Gabor Lantos, a Hungarian tourist in Torshavn.

"Some tourists were so irritated, they argued with tour operators, demanding their money back," he said, adding that would be impossible.

In Svalbard, a polar bear mauled a Czech tourist on Thursday, breaking into his tent as he slept. Jakub Moravev, flown by helicopter to hospital, escaped with slight injuries to his face, chest and an arm.

The Faroe Islands expected about 8,000 visitors on top of the island's 50,000 population for the first eclipse in the region in 60 years. About 2,000 people have made the trek to Svalbard, doubling the population.

"I've seen aurora, I've seen some volcano eruptions, but the

total eclipse is still the most spectacular thing I've ever seen. And each one is unique," said Fred Espenak, a retired NASA astrophysicist in Torshavn.

In an eclipse, when skies are clear, stars and planets are suddenly visible in daytime and a ring of fire – the corona – appears around the sun.

In one famous experiment, a 1919 eclipse gave evidence for Einstein's theory of relativity by showing that the sun's mass bent light from distant stars.

"STRANGE LIGHT"

The small audience on Friday contrasted with tens of millions of people who saw the last major eclipse in Europe in 1999. A partial eclipse was visible on Friday mainly in Europe and Russia, and it skimmed parts of north Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

"It's a very strange light, really spectacular, but I expected it to be much darker, like in the evening," said Per Andersen, a Norwegian businessman who watched the eclipse in Oslo where the moon covered almost all the sun.

Twitter was dominated by the eclipse, with seven of the top 10 trending terms related to the sun and moon in Germany. And the German word for "doomsday" was the ninth most popular topic.

The eclipse curbed solar power production in Europe, posing a challenge to electricity grids.

Germany, Europe's biggest economy, boasts the world's biggest solar powered installations, which last year supplied 6 percent of its national power needs.