

My *Astro Trails* ‘Sunshine Coast 1’ eclipse adventure

by Martin Mobberley

The 2026 August 12 Total Solar Eclipse would mark the first time I had travelled abroad since 2010. This was because once my late father Denys was in his late 80s and beyond it was not a good idea to leave him on his own. By the time he reached 91 in 2017 he had very poor mobility and if he suffered a fall he could not get back onto his feet unaided. He died in 2025, aged 99, and was very keen for me to resume eclipse chasing after he had departed. His brain was as sharp as a tack until the last few weeks.

A lot has changed in 16 years so I had considerable trepidation in resuming my travels, but at least Spain is not far away and there is no jet lag: just heat and wildfires... GULP!

I booked a short 6 day trip (Sunshine Coast 1) with *Astro Trails*, known as *Explorers* up to 2008, when the company was sold. But the owner, Brian McGee, had formed the new company a few years later and it proved just as popular.

The expedition would start at Valencia on the evening of Friday August 7 and end in Madrid on the morning of Thursday August 13. I flew out from Terminal 3 at Heathrow on Friday August 7, with the minimum of baggage. I hate heavy luggage and wanted to avoid checking-in heavy stuff to make the process smooth and to avoid straining my fragile back. All my luggage would be with me on the plane. This consisted of a very small wheeled cabin bag for the overhead bin, which contained some spare clothes, an electric razor, and a few bits and pieces: weight 4kg. Then a camera bag with my Canon EOS R6 and 100-400mm zoom lens: weight 1.3 kg. That went under the seat on the plane. I got a taxi from Cockfield, Suffolk to Heathrow.

The taxi journey was a rather surreal start to the trip. When I mentioned my destination the Bury St Edmunds taxi driver said he was actually Spanish and from Valencia...was he making that up? He didn't sound Spanish! He sounded like a Cockney!

He also said, and this left me speechless: “I often give your son a lift to Heathrow!!” Eh?! “But I don't have any children.” “Oh, but he IS the spitting image of you!” I asked him if this ‘son’ had the surname ‘Mobberley’. “No” he said.... That was the end of that bizarre conversation. I always expect to see eccentric characters on an eclipse trip, but not in the taxi ride to the airport!

Within 10 miles of Heathrow there was an accident ahead and the Spanish impersonator and fantasist diverted through Uxbridge and drove past Brunel University, where I graduated in 1980. I had not been back since, so it was a surreal diversion. A week later the Terminal 3 area was flooded which would have meant the taxi could not even have dropped me off there.

The British Airways Airbus A320 was very late arriving at the gate at Terminal 3. In fact the gate number was only confirmed at 15:30 BST, 35 minutes before the scheduled departure. I looked around for any faces I would remember from my previous eclipse trips from 1991 to 2010. Most obvious eclipse chasers (wearing Eclipse T-Shirts) were definitely from the USA.

Then I spotted someone I *did* recognise: John Sweeney, a veteran of 23 solar eclipse trips (including this one). [21 Totals, 17 seen, and 2 clear annulars, since 1990]. This was great

news because John and I shared many coach trips and meals over the next four days, remembering former trips and eclipse ‘characters’.

The plane left Heathrow at 17:22, some 77 minutes after the advertised departure time. However, it arrived at Valencia only 35 minutes late, so either we broke the sound barrier or we got into a very fast southerly jet stream.. I asked John if he was familiar with the new European Union Entry-Exit system on entering Spain. I had watched a youtube video by travel journalist Simon Calder to prepare myself. John said that he had been annoyed at no longer being an EU citizen and so, as his father was Irish, managed to get himself an Irish passport so he could avoid all this hassle. Handy! I coped OK with the EU’s EES system, although sometimes the delay when selecting ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ on the touch screen took ages to resolve itself.

I had arranged a Valencia airport to hotel transfer taxi with *Astro Trails*, who assured me, days earlier, that the taxi driver would be holding a huge *Astro Trails* board for me and others to see at Valencia. Pah! Utter tripe! The Taxi driver had a tiny *Astro Trails* logo on his smartphone screen...only visible from a few feet away!! But that was not the crazy part. The Taxi driver was way beyond morbidly obese. I can honestly say I have only once seen, in person, one larger monstrosity. That was the wrestler Giant Haystacks, in the early 1980s. Sweat was pouring off this Spanish monster. When there were four of us he hauled his 30 stone plus carcass into his cab and we got inside. The suspension of the vehicle seemed to have been wrecked.....hardly surprising with a fifth of a ton of driver in the driving seat.

I am kicking myself that I did not photograph him but if he had objected he could have bitten my head off.... Plus, only a fisheye lens could have captured his entire torso without moving back by 20 feet.. I recalled a travelogue by Patrick Moore enroute to East Germany in the 1960s to visit the Zeiss Planetarium projector works..... “Our driver is Definitely Bovine...” he had written. Likewise!

If the monster had suffered an attack of flatulence enroute to the hotel we would have been asphyxiated on arrival and ended up in the Valencia morgue.

So, two bizarre taxi drivers in the first day: a fantasist and a sphere of blubber.....

The Valencia Hotel Primus was very nice; indeed it would prove far nicer than the hotel in Madrid – more on that later. I was lucky. I was in room 126 on Floor 1, and the lift door opened precisely opposite my room....wonderful! With hundreds of *Astro Trails* travellers departing on excursions at the same time, and having breakfast at the same time, the lift system was easily overloaded but I could walk down one flight of stairs with ease. The only confusion was there were two Floor 1s on the lift control panel.....on one occasion I pressed the wrong button and ended up in a deserted void! Where had my room gone!! Then I realized that the lefthand Floor 1 button was actually Floor -1, the basement! But the minus sign had worn away.

Having not been in a foreign hotel for 16 years it took me a while to realise that the plastic room access card had to be inserted into a slot inside the door to turn the lights on!

At 8pm local time I met John Sweeney in the restaurant. He had not been as lucky, because his room was on Floor 8. For the first time in my life I was in a restaurant which did not have paper menus.... Yep, you read that right! A folded card on the table had a QR code to lead

you to the menu online..... What the ****!! The rather sulky waiter, who seemed to even be irritated by the fact two old men had sat down, was not much help. He seemed to have been trained by Basil Fawlty. On asking for a menu he just snorted and pointed at the QR code on the table. We explained that a PAPER menu was needed. We had not brought our phones to the table and, anyway, we did not know the hotel Wi-Fi password. Another snort was followed by him pointing. 'One copy – other table have it' He then walked off! About 10 minutes later he recovered the only existing laser printed A3 Menu and slapped it on our table.... Eventually he took our order. It turned out that even the starters were large enough to sustain a normal person for 24 hours, so maybe the Taxi driver was a regular customer? Every restaurant table we sat at on the four evenings in Valencia had one leg about half an inch shorter than the others.. So eating was a rock and roll experience.

The next day, after a buffet breakfast, we had a walking tour of Valencia's highlights, which was very interesting, if tiring, in the 35C heat! In the Cathedral we were told that the object inside the illuminated case, built into the wall, was definitely the actual, genuine, Holy Grail - the sacred cup a man called Jesus allegedly drank from at the Last Supper. This, of course, was the main relic hunted by Harrison Ford and his father (played by Sean Connery) in *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade*. Earlier than that there was the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

All this was very interesting because a character on a separate *Astro Trails* itinerary in our hotel (Sunshine Coast 3) resembled Jesus Christ EXACTLY. Of course he might not have been the Messiah, but just a 'very naughty boy'.

On Saturday afternoon we clambered onto a coach for a tour of the Valencia City of Arts and Science and the Marina. At this point the *Astro Trails* smartphone App that read the QR code on the lanyards we all wore gave a worrying 'Bong', indicating that John Sweeney was not booked on that trip. It looked like he might even be removed from the coach! Fortunately John had his printed itinerary with him: hard evidence! This caused some consternation and the *Astro Trails* lady dashed back into the foyer to check the laptop... 10 minutes later she returned. They'd discovered that there was another John Sweeney on the passenger list who had not booked that excursion. Apparently the flaky App could not cope with people with identical names at all! The QR code translated into the name John Sweeney but with no way of distinguishing one John Sweeney from another. With more than 1,000 *Astro Trails* travellers on the 2026 tours this was surely an accident waiting to happen. I was relieved my surname was Mobberley with only a few hundred of us in the UK!

Anyway, we then left the coach to walk through the Science and Arts centre, while John nipped off by taxi to see a Valencia Art Gallery. He did tell the tour guides he was doing this, and I reminded them, but it seemed to cause some confusion when the coach was due to leave. They were still one person short, which turned out to be due to a last-minute holiday cancellation by a lady they had forgotten about.

On the Sunday we had a coach trip to the San José Caves where boats took us through the rather small, and claustrophobic, cave system. Constantly ducking your head, enroute to the boats, and in the boats was necessary, as the Stalactites and rocks were only just above our heads at times. The caves though were blissfully cool, unlike the outside air and our coach! Our original coach had broken down enroute to the hotel, so a replacement coach was delivered.....but that one had no working air-conditioning.... With the outside temp 37C, and

the coach having glass windows with no curtains, this was like travelling inside a greenhouse!! We were VERY pleased to return to the hotel, as walking dehydrated carcasses of dripping sweat. I was glad I had not packed my Duffle coat and Balaclava helmet for the holiday.

It was there that a fellow traveller on a different tour recognised me. This was Anthony West from Cleckheaton. He remembered me from previous trips and had my 2007 *Total Solar Eclipses and How to Observe Them* book, as did John Sweeney. Then we learned that the *Astro Trails* identical name bug had also affected him! There was indeed another Anthony West on the exact same itinerary! In fact, after finding this out, the two Anthony Wests travelled together as friends. As the QR code reader App could not cope with this duplication either the *Astro Trails* staff stuck labels above the two lanyard QR codes. One label said 'Cleckheaton' and the other said... 'London'. At this point a lady called Anna McKinstrey recognised me from the 2008 Jules Verne Trans-Siberian eclipse trip. She also had my Eclipse book and recalled my photo of John Mason extracting staples from a wad of Rupees in Delhi.

In the last couple of days we had identified a couple of Valencia features (apart from heat exhaustion) that could wreck a holiday. One was the height of the kerbs. These were easily twice the height of a UK kerb. One man in our itinerary had quite a nasty stumble. The other problem was the red cycle paths along the side of every road. When getting on a coach outside a hotel the coach has to park on the black road, not the cycle path. So there is a metre-wide red strip over which travellers have to cross to board the bus. Local youngsters zip along these cycle paths on bicycles and e-scooters creating havoc to people who are not familiar with these red paths. There were several near-misses in the three days we were there, plus one e-scooter collision with a piece of luggage.

On the Monday we had a trip to the Albufera Natural park. The coach air-con. worked fine this time.... Phew! That was just as well as the outdoor temp was still peaking at 37C. That region had suffered catastrophic mud flows on 2024 October 29 when 700mm of rain dropped on the region in 24 hours, causing 238 deaths. There was no evidence of that devastation visible now. We had an enjoyable boat trip on the lake in a solar panel powered boat, and a splendid lunch in a blissfully cold restaurant. Our boat's huge solar panel was a wonderful shield against the Sun, and the water was cooler than the air, so the temperature on the lake was very pleasant indeed. One American woman at the wildlife observatory asked what the nearby bird in the lake was..... "It's a duck." said the tour guide. She'd never seen one! At this point her husband started manically quacking..... I am grateful to John Sweeney for telling me about this strange event.

The next day saw us all pile onto the high speed train from Valencia to Madrid. Baggage had to be X-rayed and we were checked out too, just like at an airport. The train started precisely on time (10:57am) and arrived on time as well (12:53pm). 190 miles in under two hours. Wonderful! Network Rail please note..

We were then driven in a convoy of six coaches to the hotel bizarrely named 'NH Collection Madrid Eurobuilding'. The bizarre name was very appropriate for the huge hotel! We were firmly told by *Astro Trails* that we could not enter our rooms until 3pm. That sounded totally crazy as there were 256 of us arriving at the hotel in one lump at 1.30pm. Surely the hotel would want to get us all out of the lobby and installed in our rooms ASAP? Well, fortunately,

Astro Trails were wrong! Common sense prevailed and we could check in straight away... I was in my room, number 367, before 2pm.

However, the tricky part was fathoming out the crazy lifts. Now, I have not been abroad since 2010, so maybe I am out of touch, but even experienced travellers on the trip, veterans of 20+ eclipse trips, were swearing profoundly at the lifts. No-one could find a way to go to a specific floor from INSIDE the lift, using the buttons. A few travellers had previously been in hotels where your contactless room card was needed to select a floor button from inside the lift, but the floor you wanted in this hotel had to be selected from OUTSIDE the lift, using your contactless room card and the buttons on a screen.

As if that was not enough hassle for tired and sweaty travellers with heavy luggage, things got worse. Firstly, the software was flaky and temperamental, no doubt due to 256 people trying to use the lifts at the same time! Secondly, if you managed to select the floor you wanted, and summon the lift, the screen would think about things and then put letter A, B, C or D on the screen with an arrow pointing to where the lift you summoned was arriving. BUT.... Lift D was the one it normally summoned and Lift D was nowhere near Lifts A, B and C, which were all together. Oh no, Lift D was about 40 feet away around a corner. So, by the time you had 'Hauled Ass' and luggage to Lift D the lift had arrived, doors had opened, waited a few seconds, and then closed again, and zoomed off!

The *Astro Trails* traveller next to me, a plain speaking man from Northern England, had clearly had enough.... "These ***** software nerds are determined to make all our lives a ***** misery. Everywhere you go – use an App for this, use an App for that! Restaurant Menus on a ***** QR Code, cars that have no buttons, knobs, or switches, just a ***** touchscreen menu and toilets you can't use without an App.... Then ***** Windows Updates every ***** week that trash your computer. These utter ***** sad cases have wrecked all our lives at home, now they are wrecking our holidays too.....BASTARDS, BASTARDS, ***** BASTARDS!"

A few travellers tried to calm him down but I agreed with every word he said. Then, there was a miracle.... A couple next to me managed to summon a lift and it was lift B, only a few feet from me. AND, they too were on the 3rd Floor... Yippee! So, I jumped in without using my room card.... Of course this totally defeats the whole point of the absurd system, which is keeping out people who are, e.g., thieves or perverts, who don't have a card. Anyone can get to a floor, simply by jumping in the lift with others who do have room cards..... Crazy!

The other issue was that floors that contained facilities like breakfast, or the lobby, or other facilities, were not labelled 1, 2, 3 etc.. but S1, PB, PS and other strange abbreviations. It was not clear where these floors actually lived within the building... But being on the 3rd floor I was again lucky. John Sweeney was on the 13th floor this time. Misery!

The next bizarre aspect of my room was the shower area. It was designed to cause maximum injury to anyone who was not a super-fit and sure-footed athlete and contortionist. The Valencia room shower had taken a few minutes to suss out. The Valencia bidet was brilliant at cold soaking the big toe on my right foot which had a troublesome in-growing toe nail.

By comparison, using the Madrid room shower would be a test worthy of The Krypton Factor. Indeed, working out the room lights, room TV and shower would surely have even stretched the intellect of Carl Friedrich Gauss, despite his IQ of 250!

The Madrid chrome shower head was mounted about three feet above the shower floor, so it was either designed for use by dwarfs, or purely as a hand held bidet..... However, eventually I managed to extend the absurdly stiff cable to five feet, so I could use it, while crouching. There were two bizarre temperature and flow controls jutting out of the wall.... One was a 2-inch diameter chrome cylinder that had 30, 35 and 30 on the top (water temp) and 40, 45 and 40 on the underside. The other just had a tiny lever, jutting out to start the flow.

The temperature control had seized....it could only be rotated by a few degrees even with maximum effort.... I then slowly pulled the lever on the other cylinder... This resulted in a cubic light-year of cold water (or maybe it was urine?) dropping onto my head from the ceiling!!! I looked up and saw, two metres above my head, what looked like a black slab of burnt toast, stuck to the ceiling, with a few holes in it..... After that deluge, no more water came from the ceiling. I fiddled again with the tiny lever.... This time warm water gushed out of the hand held shower head. Seconds later the chrome cap and lever fell off and crashed to the floor..... I then spent a minute, while being drenched, trying to fit it back together. The cap had almost fallen down the huge plug hole! The other problem was that the coefficient of friction of the entire shower floor area was almost zero. Indeed, it must surely have been constructed from Aluminium Magnesium Boride.

I was hanging on to the shower head support structure for grim death and left the shower room crawling on my hands and knees.....

After much fiddling I got the TV to work and found BBC News. They were just about to mention the Eclipse and had a link to Nigel Henbest in Spain, with his American wife Bridget Brown, who was clearly about 40 years younger than him!

The source of food in this strange building was called the Bikini Bar for no clear reason... Waitresses were, sadly, not wearing Bikinis. I ordered a Bikini Classico, which was a toasted ham and cheese sandwich, and a Coke Zero.

Real leather bound Menus were available here, but were sitting on an obscure shelf, in the foyer, well outside the Bikini bar. Another traveller, from the UK showed me where they hidden. I was very grateful for her help.

Meanwhile John Sweeney had escaped his 13th floor room and got a Taxi to take him to a Madrid museum. On the way back the taxi dropped him off at the NH Collection Madrid Eurobuilding. He got out but the place where he was dropped off looked like a boarded up bomb site, with no sign of life. Panic set in. Where the hell was he? So he hailed another taxi.... That driver told him yes, this was indeed the NH Collection Madrid Eurobuilding, but the reverse side, and that side was indeed boarded up. He needed to walk around the other side, which he did...and there was the hotel entrance... Bizarre!

Next day was eclipse day and so a convoy of coaches left Madrid for Sigüenza Castle, 85 miles away, early in the morning. There were 415 people on that trip as about 160 *Astro Trails* customers had arrived at Madrid the day before us. Basically, *Astro Trails* had booked the entire crazy hotel!

The trip only took two hours so we then had a very long and very hot wait, at the Castle until the eclipse. Fortunately there were loads of air conditioned areas within the Castle hotel.

Shortly after we arrived everyone's mobile phones went off with an alert, a loud and scary event. The message was just a reminder for visitors and locals not to start barbecues or discard cigarettes etc... and not to stare at the Sun. Mark Kidger told me that in the previous days the motorway and dual carriageway signs had flashed a warning not to drive while wearing Solar Eclipse glasses. Sound advice!

The Castle 'coffee bar', serving all manner of drinks was very busy... Serving over 600 *Astro Trails* Eclipse Chasers, who all needed regular hydration, was quite a task for the small workforce at the bar. Many people, mainly from the USA, had staked their places with their tripods against the Castle walls. However I was going hand held so had no need. Many *Astro Trails* people had already been booked into the Castle hotel for a couple of days already. During the afternoon all the *Astro Trails* travellers were fed in a massive couple of rooms, in two shifts.

I was very pleased to meet a few familiar and semi-familiar faces at the Castle, not least Big Paul Whiting of Orwell Astronomical Society, Ipswich, and Andrew White. Andrew and his late wife Val had been regular Eclipse Chasers with *Explorers* in the 1990s and up to 2009. Paul had made friends with some Americans staying at the Castle and they had offered him a place under their sunshade tarpaulin. Temporarily mislaying his sun hat Paul was walking around with a handkerchief on his head in the manner of a Monty Python Gumby.

Finally, first contact occurred at 19:35:39 local time, after which everyone just stayed where they were situated. There was one unexpected moment of drama in the castle ground, just 20 minutes before Totality. All 600 *Astro Trails* eclipse chasers at the castle had those lanyards with a QR code around their necks. Castle security were keeping a lookout for intruders and guarding the castle courtyard entrance. Somehow a local man, who looked about 45 or so, had sneaked in, and was spotted and followed by a Spanish tour guide and a member of the security team. He tried to avoid them by merging with the throng, but they summoned the local police who arrived in two cars and arrested him. With 15 minutes until Totality they carted him away, which seemed a bit sad to me...surely they could have carted him off AFTER Totality? Clearly the police had no interest whatsoever in the eclipse themselves.

I had travelled light to this eclipse and, with Totality at 7.5 degrees altitude, I decided to just concentrate on short exposures for second and third contact and for the corona as well. The camera would be hand held, at 400mm focal length. Tripods are heavy things! Looking at my previous exposures from 2010 and earlier I decided that, with maybe 1.5 magnitudes of atmospheric extinction, an exposure of $1/400^{\text{th}}$ at f/8 should work well for the diamond rings and prominences, and I would go for $1/50^{\text{th}}$ for the mid-totality exposure. The ISO was set to 400. Experiments on the Full Moon carried out at home indicated this would work if image stabilisation was engaged and if I used High Speed Continuous mode set to 8 frames/second. Focusing would be critical and would have to be done before Totality. I chose to focus on the distant landscape in the opposite direction to the Sun, just 15 minutes before second contact. I was using Manual Focus, as I do not trust the camera to autofocus on a jiggling around Solar Eclipse! But caution is necessary here. The focus ring on my Canon RF 100-400mm lens adjusts the internal lenses relative to a default spacing after the camera is turned on. If it is turned off the lenses go back to a default spacing and focus will be lost. So, I was careful NOT to turn the camera off before Totality.

One slice of luck – Someone had illegally parked a brand new red Toyota Yaris inside the cordoned off courtyard. I decided that the end of the car roof would make a brilliant brace to support my elbows, and it did.

The light level started to drop dramatically in the last minute and, with about 15 seconds to go, I raised the camera to the Sun, using the LCD viewfinder to find it. I then depressed the shutter and the camera started firing off at 8 frames per second. As the last bit of Sun disappeared I watched second contact visually, holding the camera as steadily as I could, while it fired away. I then gazed at the awesome spectacle. There was a superb, large, crimson prominence right next to where the diamond ring was fading. The chromosphere was the same colour and the background sky was a sort of brown/orange colour. It was an awesome sight. With mid-Totality approaching I switched to 1/50th second and resumed the 8 frames/second exposures for 20 seconds. Then, again, I took in the spooky visual view. With third contact not far off I returned to a 1/400th exposure and resumed the 8 frames/second onslaught.... Once again, I watched visually and kept my camera steady, helped by the roof of the Yaris. Third contact came and went in a flash, to loads of cheers. The time had flown by....as it always does during Totality. Those 100 seconds or so had seemed like 40 seconds. I was not interested in the partial phases and so got into the first *Astro Trails* people carrier to take me back to the first coach to depart.

It was a much slower three hour ride back to Madrid as there was VERY heavy traffic. Far worse though were the two young men from the USA holding a running conversation with each other just a few seats behind John Sweeney and myself. We had encountered these loud motormouths on other trips.... and many people groaned when they switched their vocal cords on....There was no OFF switch. The noise lasted for the whole three hour return trip. Every subject was covered at full volume....food, travel, cooking, playing Chess, cars, wine, Whisky, Gin. It went on and on and on and reminded me of the Jake Thackray ditty 'On again, On again'.... As John Sweeney said "This must be what it is like to die and go to Hell". Imagine Alan Carr merged with Donald Trump, times two....yep, it was that bad.

But, thankfully, I was back in my hotel room before local midnight and I managed almost four and a half hours sleep before I checked out and my taxi arrived to take me, and two female eclipse chasers, to the airport at 5am. *Astro Trails* had said there were four of us heading to the airport and one of their staff would be up at 5am to supervise.... Frankly, I did not believe that, and I was right! I checked the deserted reception area *Astro Trails* list in the foyer when the fourth person did not appear....it was the same person who had cancelled the trip: the missing female who had confused the tour guides by being absent on the Marina/Science Centre tour. So, the three of us headed to the airport and our flights, via a stone-faced shouty woman at airport security. She sounded German and I think she was surely an SS Sturmbannführer in a previous life!

I was back home in West Suffolk before 2pm, less than 19 hours after third contact. It was just as damn hot here!

The *Astro Trails* staff told me there had been 600 people at Sigüenza, another 260 at other sites in Spain, and 180 on the Greenland Cruise ship. So, 1,040 *Astro Trails* eclipse chasers in total!

For me the best part of any foreign trip is getting back home. Examining my camera I had taken about 500 pictures of the eclipse hand held. Quite a few were shaky, but many were very sharp. So my tripod free, minimum luggage strategy had worked, helped by the roof of a Toyota Yaris!

Next stop is Morocco next year, for my twelfth Total Solar Eclipse trip..... If there is enough aviation fuel for the planes by then.....

Martin Mobberley