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Tintin and Snowy couldn't make it, but when **MARK JENKINS** and his friend Large headed to South America to witness a total eclipse from the top of a 20,000-foot mountain, they ran into enough scrapes, snafus, and banana peels to fill a comic book. It's almost as if somebody up there didn't like them.

Journeys

page 65
Outside Magazine
June/July 2020

HO AND HSI WERE THE COURT ASTROLOGERS FOR CHINESE EMPEROR CHUNG K'ANG IN 2136 B.C. THROUGHOUT HISTORY, CHINESE RULERS—WHO WERE SOMETIMES PARANOID MEGALOMANIACS—USED ASTRONOMICAL DIVINATION TO JUSTIFY THEIR OFTEN ECCENTRIC DECISIONS, AND A TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE WAS BELIEVED TO BE A BAD OMEN.

According to legend, Ho and Hsi failed to predict the eclipse that occurred on October 22—4,156 years ago—and both were beheaded. It still seems like a bum rap: no one would be able to predict the precise timing of a solar eclipse, within a few minutes, until 1715.

Luckily, my friend Large and I, despite getting almost everything wrong about the eclipse in South America last summer, only lost our heads metaphorically.

Our goal was to be the first confirmed humans to witness a total solar eclipse from a peak above 20,000 feet. This half-baked scheme came to me while watching the 2017 eclipse from inside the zone of totality—specifically, from a prairie bluff in central Wyoming. The strangeness of seeing the world go black in the middle of the day was so provocative, so entrancing, that it made me wonder: What would it be like to experience an eclipse from the summit of a high peak?

Research indicated that the 2019 total solar eclipse would be fully visible from a 20,548-foot Argentinean peak called Majadita, on July 2 at 5:40 P.M. A relatively unknown knob along the spine of the Andes, Majadita rises at Argentina's border with Chile, 155 miles north of Aconcagua, which at 22,831 feet is the highest mountain in the Western Hemisphere. First climbed in 1965, Majadita has seen only a handful of ascents since.

I cross-checked NASA's eclipse logs with the American and British alpine journals and found no mention of anyone being at high altitude during an eclipse. Obviously, countless humans living in elevated places—the Himalayas, the Karakorum, the Andes—were witness to total solar eclipses over the past few thousand years, but above 20,000 feet? It's damn cold and barren up there; without down parkas and double boots, you freeze to death. The likelihood seemed small.

Putting my plan in motion, I called Matt "Large" Hebard, a native of eastern Wisconsin who now lives in suburban Denver and is

always dying to get after it, whatever it happens to be. Large is physically large—nearly six feet, 200 pounds of solid muscle—but he earned his nickname mainly because he's large of spirit. When he graduated from high school in 1995, pudgy, neglected, and poor, he went directly to work in a toilet-seat factory. He stayed there two years before deciding college wasn't the worst idea. He got a degree, moved to the Rockies, got another degree, then another, and now runs a forest preschool. (There are no classrooms; kids

MERLIN THE MAGICIAN, AN ECLIPSE CHASER, WORE RED ROCK-CLIMBING SHOES, GLITTERY NEON LYCRA TIGHTS, A MASSIVE SHAGGY PURPLE COAT, A SPANGLED CAP WITH A DROOPY POINT, AND WRAPAROUND CAT-EYE SUNGLASSES. HE LOOKED LIKE A REJECT FROM MIDDLE-EARTH.

are outside the whole time.) Along the way, he rode bikes hard or climbed mountains fast nearly every weekend for two decades.

"Large!" I shouted into the phone. "Want to do an expedition to the Andes?"

"I'm in," he said, without a split second of hesitation. "I'll bring the cheese."

He didn't even know which mountain we were going to. What's more, his wife, Cherie, was pregnant. But the trip as I described it seemed simple and hard to resist: fly to Chile, catch a ride to the base of Majadita, make camp, climb the thing, put on protective eyewear, and wait for the big event.

"When we going?" he asked. I gave him the dates. "I'll get tickets."

DURING THE FLIGHT to Chile, I read about Esarhaddon, the king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire from 680 to 669 B.C.

Esarhaddon is remembered for rebuilding Babylon and warring with his neighbors. He defeated the Cimmerians, the Urartians, and the Egyptians, but evidently was deathly scared of eclipses. On as many as eight occasions during his 12-year reign, whenever an eclipse of any kind was foretold by court astrologers, he put a substitute king in his place, to protect the true ruler from any harm that might be portended by the eclipse.

This faux king got to wear the king's clothing and sit on the throne. He participated in the daily rites and rituals practiced by royalty, reciting litanies, making proclamations, enjoying ablutions, purifications, and wine with a consort. He was the full-blown king for a day or two while Esarhaddon kept a low profile. When the eclipse passed and the sun returned, Esarhaddon had the fake king executed and settled back onto his throne.

Large was enjoying his Marvel airplane movie, but I bothered him with this story anyway.

"I don't buy that shit," he said. "Nobody's that much of a sucker."

Hmm, well. I could think of one or two likely candidates.

When we arrived in Arturo Merino Benítez International Airport, having already purchased nonrefundable tickets to fly north to La Serena, a smaller city on the Chilean coast, we learned that the eastbound road from there up to Majadita was closed because of deep snow. We couldn't get within 50



The total solar eclipse of July 2, 2019, as seen from Chile's Atacama Desert

miles of the mountain from the Chilean side.

"You didn't look into this?" Large asked.

"Winter is supposed to be the dry season," I said lamely. Expeditions usually fail on the mountain—bad weather, avalanches, sickness, valiant problems all—but ours nearly ended before it started.

Change of plans. We would approach Majadita from Argentina. Unfortunately, there were no reasonable flights from Santiago to that dusty corner of the country. Our only option: buses. Three days of buses.

We caught a local to the international bus station in Santiago and somehow left one of our duffels on it. Rookie move! Large hailed a cab and we told the guy to give chase. For many blocks, the bus driver was oblivious to our honking and my frantic miming of the message I-left-a-bag-on-your-bus-and-really-need-it-so-please-pull-over. But finally he got it and we retrieved our stuff.

Later, at the international depot, we were in line to board when we met a man who identified himself as Merlin the Magician. We'd seen him wandering around the station and wrongly assumed that he was homeless. He wore red rock-climbing shoes, glittery neon Lycra tights, a massive shaggy purple coat, a spangled cap with a droopy point, and wraparound cat-eye sunglasses. Salt-and-pepper hair fanned out beneath his cap, merging with an enormous beard. He looked like a reject from Middle-earth.

"You guys eclipse chasers?" he said, shaking our hands vigorously. "I am. Chased 'em all over the world. Did you know that eclipses are—"

And with that he was off, launching into a lecture about their indescribable spiritual power and how this power is intimately connected to ancient horoscopes and how seeing an eclipse can change your life even more than

crystals or pyramids or ayahuasca or Burning Man. Large found him both entertaining and annoying. "What a piece of work," he said.

This was our first encounter with an eclipse junkie. For such people, seeing one is an identity thing. It's the basis of their tribe. They have the money to fly around the planet, book hotels and rental cars, and spend days getting themselves to remote places to watch a two-and-a-half-minute blackout. We would meet more of them—many of whom appear to be white, rich, elderly divorcés with a taste for pisco sours—but none more flamboyant than Merlin.

OUR INTERNATIONAL bus trip through the Andes took eight hours. We both had window seats for the ride, which involved dozens of hairpin switchbacks up and over Paso Internacional Los Libertadores, at 12,916 feet. Since it was midwinter, the snow was

deep in many places and the mountains dark and foreboding. Large listened to deafening music while I silently questioned the wisdom of our adventure. After sliding through the Tunnel of Christ the Redeemer and dropping into the foothills of Argentina, I returned to my personal journey through the mythology of eclipses.

The Maori of New Zealand believed an eclipse was an attack by demons who ate the sun. The Vikings believed there were two vicious sky wolves in the heavens, Hati and Skoll. Hati ate the sun during a solar eclipse; Skoll ate the moon during a lunar eclipse. For the Chinese, it was a dragon that devoured the sun. For the people of Vietnam, it was a hungry frog.

Not all cultural myths about eclipses have involved violent beasts. The Warlpiri Australian Aborigines thought the moon and sun were man and woman, and a solar eclipse was coitus on a cosmic scale. Still,

many ancient cultures interpreted eclipses as evil events, and they occasionally did evil things in the hope of preventing bad outcomes. The Aztecs offered human sacrifices to the darkening skies.

Superstition eventually lost out. Thanks in part to visionary astronomers like Copernicus and Galileo—who dared to suggest that the Earth wasn't the stationary center of the universe—eclipse myths were replaced by scientific facts, which of course can be as mind-blowing as superstition.

As we now know, a solar eclipse occurs when the moon passes between Earth and the sun. As our planet circles the sun—in an elliptic orbit, the nearly circular path that takes a year to complete—the moon loops Earth, completing one pass every 27 days. Because the moon's orbit is inclined 5.15 degrees off the ecliptic plane, the moon crosses this path only twice a month.

These points of intersection are called lunar nodes. A solar eclipse can only happen when a new moon is at or near a node. Earth's distance from the sun and the moon's distance from Earth vary throughout the year.

Although the moon is roughly 400 times smaller than the sun, it's also closer to Earth than it is to the sun. But because both Earth and the moon have elliptic orbits, the distance can vary. If an eclipse occurs when the moon is close to Earth and the sun is far from Earth, the moon appears to fully block out the sun, causing a total solar eclipse. On average, one of these is visible somewhere on Earth every 18 months. The next one is scheduled to take place on December 14, 2020, once again crossing Chile and Argentina.

By the time we'd rumbled into Mendoza, I was an eclipse expert—as long as you didn't ask me to repeat anything without having the books in front of me. We found a good hostel, ate a bad steak, put away several half-liter bottles of Andes beer, and hit the hay.

In the morning, we caught a bus northbound to San Juan, bombing through vineyards and cattle ranches that resembled a more rustic Napa Valley. A cheap hotel, more Argentinian beef and beer, good sleep, bad breakfast, hop another northbound bus—onward!

LAS FLORES, an adobe village in the desert, was the end of the line. From here we would have to cut sharply left, into the mountains. We dragged our expedition bags from the bus, ducked into a gas station while protecting our eyes from a dust storm, pulled out a Spanish dictionary, and asked whoever

would listen how to get to Majadita.

Nobody had heard of it, even though you could see the Andes from where we stood. We were told to talk to the soldiers who policed the border. Their headquarters were across the road from the gas station.

Large bought me a pile of junk food and got himself several pots of coffee. "I don't like it," I said, eating corn chips. "Nothing good ever comes from talking to the cops."

Large agreed but pointed out that we didn't have much choice. Eventually, he

AROUND MIDNIGHT, LARGE AND I WERE AWAKENED BY THE SOUND OF A FREIGHT TRAIN. IN MINUTES, WE WERE HIT BY WINDS THAT ALMOST TORE THE TENT RIGHT OFF US. I CRAWLED OUTSIDE AND USED BOWLING-BALL-SIZE STONES FROM THE ROADSIDE TO TIE DOWN THE GUYLINES.

shouldered his expedition pack, hung mine from his neck, grabbed our two 50-pound duffels, and marched over to the barracks, where a soldier escorted us into a small room with a crackling fireplace at one end and a TV at the other. There were two more soldiers inside, male and female, both in identical green uniforms. They were watching TV, bouncing between a lusty telenovela and a soccer match. They ignored us for a while, then flipped through our heavily stamped passports with indifference. They had no idea why we were here.

For all the time I've spent in Spanish-speaking countries, I should know the language by now, but I don't. I stumbled along with individual words and charades. "Escalar," I said, using imaginary ice axes to show myself climbing imaginary ice.

When we'd finally conveyed what we were doing, the female soldier pointed at me and said, "Asi que tú eres el escalador." (I looked it up later: "So you are the climber.") Then she pointed to Large and said, admiringly, "Y él es el camión."

"What did she just call me?" he asked.

"A truck," I said. This pleased him.

Eventually, a higher-ranking soldier was brought in to give us the bad news: the border was closed.

"Por qué?" I asked. He said the snow was very deep, that no one crosses in winter.

Shouldn't I have known this? I'd tried.



My eldest daughter, Addi, is fluent in Spanish, and she'd made several international calls on my behalf but never got a straight answer about how to reach the mountain from Chile or Argentina.

"Man, are we screwed," Large said.

I noticed that the soldiers had an internet connection, and with their permission I managed to pull up a few magazine stories I'd written. Using Google Translate, they were able to read my stuff, including an article about my wretched ascent of Mount Everest in 2012.

This changed their minds. With real alacrity, they typed up a lengthy document, which basically said that the nation of Argentina would not be responsible for our asses and that we could not expect a rescue if we got in trouble.

The soldiers arranged to have a pickup drive us into the Argentinian Andes. Large and I sat crammed into the back of the cab, behind a driver and two soldiers. They were all delighted by the opportunity to get off the base, especially on such an absurd errand. We traveled 25 miles to the border-guard station, the last outpost in Argentina. Two lonely soldiers unlocked the gate and we drove through, but after a couple of miles the driver stopped. He said the snow was too deep. We laughed. There was no more than four inches on the ground. We were still over 20 miles from where we planned to put base camp. We tried to bribe him, but he said that he had never driven in snow and steadfastly refused to go any farther.

The soldiers helped us unload our mountain of gear in the middle of the road.

"Te deseo buena suerte, pero dudo si la conseguirás," one said, shaking our hands. ("I wish you good luck, but I doubt you will get it.") The other said the wind was fiercer than the devil, ominously adding, "Ya verás." ("You will see.")

We shouldered stunningly heavy packs—two weeks of food and fuel, mountaineering gear, Arctic parkas, minus 40 bags, a four-season tent—and staggered up the road until dark, advancing what felt like only a few miles. We stomped out a platform and set up in the middle of the road. It was utterly windless.

Around midnight, Large and I were awakened by the sound of a freight train. In minutes, we were hit by winds that almost tore the tent right off us. I crawled outside and used bowling-ball-size stones from the roadside to tie down the guylines.

"Feels like Wyoming!" Large yelled.

"I don't think the tent will last the night!" I said. It did, but barely. In the morning, we moved camp to a more sheltered location

by a river that paralleled the road. The wind was still so fierce that we had to put blocks of ice on our half-full packs to keep them from blowing away.

We were in a fix and we knew it. We were too far from the mountain. Our packs were too heavy to carry everything in a single push, so we decided to make half-load carries. We spent the entire day humping heavy gear uphill, through deep snow, into an 80-mile-per-hour wind. I was regularly knocked flat.

That night, inside the tent, with both of us holding the poles to keep it from being torn off us, I knew we were screwed.

"Large, we're not going to make it," I said weakly.

"What do you mean?"

"In these kinds of conditions, we're days and days from the summit."

Even worse, we were so deep in arroyos on the eastern side of the Andes that we might miss the event entirely, given that it would take place at dusk, **continued on page 81** →

SOME LIKE IT DARK

A total solar eclipse is the perfect excuse for an epic adventure. Here are great destinations for the next three blackouts. —Alison Van Houten

December 14, 2020 Pucón, Chile

Perched on the eastern shore of Lake Villarrica, this adventure-sports mecca is a popular gateway to the Villarrica volcano and numerous national parks, as well as climbing, mountain biking, and whitewater.

December 4, 2021 South Orkney Islands, Antarctica

To see this one, your best bet is to go with an outfitter like Quark Expeditions, which offers a Solar Eclipse 2021 trip that ventures into the Scotia Sea between the remote South Orkney Islands and South Georgia, neither of which has infrastructure for tourism.

April 20, 2023 North West Cape, Australia

Fly into Exmouth, on the tip of Western Australia, to view the eclipse from the arid Cape Range National Park or adjacent Ningaloo Marine Park, a Unesco World Heritage site known for white-sand beaches, biodiverse coral reefs, and whale sharks, which can grow to 60 feet long.



low in the western sky.

"It's either the eclipse or the summit," I said. I knew Large wanted to climb Majadita far more than he wanted to see the eclipse.

"The eclipse," he said, entirely for me.

We turned tail, and by the next day I had made it back down to the outpost, where there were two soldiers but no vehicle. They radioed for a truck, which wouldn't arrive until late afternoon. I killed time playing Ping-Pong with a general, Pérez Ramón Valerio, losing one game after another.

BACK IN LAS FLORES, licking our wounds, we refused to give up completely. The bartender had a friend who consulted for local gold mines, and she rented us a Toyota Hilux, which is about the size of a 4Runner.

We took off across the desert on the cold, windy morning of June 31. We didn't have maps for this area, and the GPS didn't work. Eventually, we found a two-track veering west up a narrow streambed. As we headed into the mountains, we passed abandoned corrals and followed an old aqueduct, making tighter and tighter turns beneath crumbling rock walls.

The two-track crossed and recrossed the river. At first the fords were minor affairs—gun and go—but soon the banks were lined with foot-deep ledges of ice. Even in four-wheel low, it would be easy to roll sideways. I eventually stopped at a dangerous crossing.

"The water is too deep," I whined. "The ice is too high."

"No problem," Large said. He jumped out and started carrying boulders, some probably weighing 200 pounds, and dumping them in the river. In half an hour, he'd built a bridge that I could drive across, which I did with trepidation.

The more we climbed, the deeper the snow. Large made a half-dozen more stone bridges, and we continued fording icy creeks, but eventually we high-centered at around 10,000 feet. There happened to be a stone hut nearby, presumably built for cowboys working the high meadows in summer.

"Gaucho camp!" Large said, pleased that we were getting somewhere. We built a fire

inside the roofless stone enclosure.

The next day, about 33 hours from the eclipse, we set off for the highest unknown, unnamed mountain we could see. We climbed from 10,000 to 16,200 feet in less than six hours, almost entirely on loose scree. (The snow had blown off into the valley below.) At the summit the wind was ripping, the windchill way below zero.

"Sun's out, guns out," Large declared. This was our motto during the many climbs we'd done in the Rockies, but I wasn't about to get naked.

Large frowned at my wimpiness and began disrobing. He pulled off layer after layer until he was bare chested, crammed his square head into a Green Bay Packers stocking cap, thrust his tattooed arms into the air, and howled like a banshee.

On the descent, we did the longest standing rock glissade of our lives—5,000 feet—arriving at the base in less than an hour. Back at gaucho camp, around the campfire, I showed Large pictures of himself shirtless in the roaring cold. Staring, he said, "We'll be right there tomorrow evening for the eclipse." (I was planning to print out a photo and frame it for him, but my camera and cell phone were stolen a week later at a bus station in Santiago.)

Around midnight we were once again hit by freight-train winds, which this time succeeded in destroying the tent. By 4 A.M., our start time for the summit, the wind was so ferocious that we worried it would knock over the Hilux. Going higher was not in the cards. We couldn't even stand. Beaten again, we abandoned gaucho camp and banged out of the mountains, almost rolling the Hilux in the river several times. The eclipse was only five hours away. We had to get onto the plains to witness it.

Racing the sun, we drove back to Las Flores, then out to the desert bluffs beyond Bella Vista. It was an ideal location, so we assumed there would be a few locals around. When we arrived, we were shocked to see that more than a thousand people had gathered, most of them eclipse tourists from all over the world. Large and I parked on a dirt hillock at 4:24 P.M., just as the moon began nibbling at the sun. Red dust hung in the air like Martian fog.

WE CLIMBED onto the roof of the Hilux; there were people scattered around us for miles. The tourists had come by charter bus, the massive vehicles lined up in rows like humpbacked beasts. The locals had come by pickup or horse.

Just behind us were three gauchos on

Matt "Large" Hebard (left) with the author on the summit of Colorado's Mount Harvard in fall 2019



horseback, two men and a boy. They wore leather chaps and red caps, white shirts and cowboy boots with spurs, and they held their reins easily. They faced west, waiting motionlessly for the eclipse to blacken the blue peaks of the Andes.

Before Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro invaded western South America in 1532, the Inca Empire stretched the length of the Andes, from Colombia in the north to Chile and Argentina in the south. The Inca were sophisticated farmers, and they worshipped Inti, the sun god.

To the Inca, an eclipse meant Inti was angry. In the hope that he would not abandon them and their vast, terraced, carefully irrigated crops, they made many sacrifices. Even the Incan emperors, in union with the people, would fast for days after an eclipse to appease Inti's displeasure.

Nobody was fasting here. Everyone was tailgating with food, beer, and babies. It was one big party.

As the world grew dark, Large and I donned our glasses and stared at the sun. When it vanished entirely, the vast crowds hooted and whistled. Then, for more than two minutes, we silently bathed in the cold, dark shadow.

This is what we'd all come for: to be inside the Zone of Totality, to momentarily experience the odd exhilaration and vague, primordial fear of what it would be like if our planet actually lost the sun. There was not a breath of wind. The coolness of the dusty air settled upon us, magical as a light snowfall.

"Think we're eclipse chasers?" I asked.

"Hell no," Large growled. "We're failed mountain climbers." **1**

MARK JENKINS, A LONGTIME OUTSIDE CONTRIBUTOR, IS PLANNING A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO MAJADITA WHEN THE WIND DIES DOWN.