

# Astronomers worldwide point telescopes skywards for rare transit of Venus

BY RACHEL GOULD

Associated Press

GREENWICH, England — The spectacle of tiny Venus passing across the face of the sun awed observers around the world today, as people from Australia to the United States squinted skyward or hunched over telescopes for the rare event.

Many came with a sense of cosmic wonder, some were only puzzled.

"How come the sun had a black dot in it?" Dorcas Tam, 7, asked in Hong Kong.

Across the Middle East — well-positioned to see the entire six-hour transit — viewers took to the mountains in Lebanon, the desert in Jordan and the pyramids in Egypt to get a glimpse.

People in Africa and Europe could also see almost the entire show, while only the tail end of the event could be seen by just the eastern portions of the United States and Canada.

"The hook that got people was that there was no one in our lifetime who had ever seen it. My son Daniel got gripped by that," said Debbie Musselwhite, who came with 10-year-old son to join several hundred people at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England.

"It's a brilliant opportunity to know the mechanics of our solar system," said another visitor, Shereza Feilden, 14.

Some people were waiting in line at 6 a.m. for a chance to use

one of the filter-equipped telescopes provided by the observatory, said Emily Winterburn, curator of astronomy.

The Royal Observatory, beside the Thames in southeast London, has a historic connection to the transit, which occurs twice — eight years apart — about every century. In 1716, Edmond Halley of comet fame observed the transit at Greenwich to calculate the distance between the Earth and the sun.

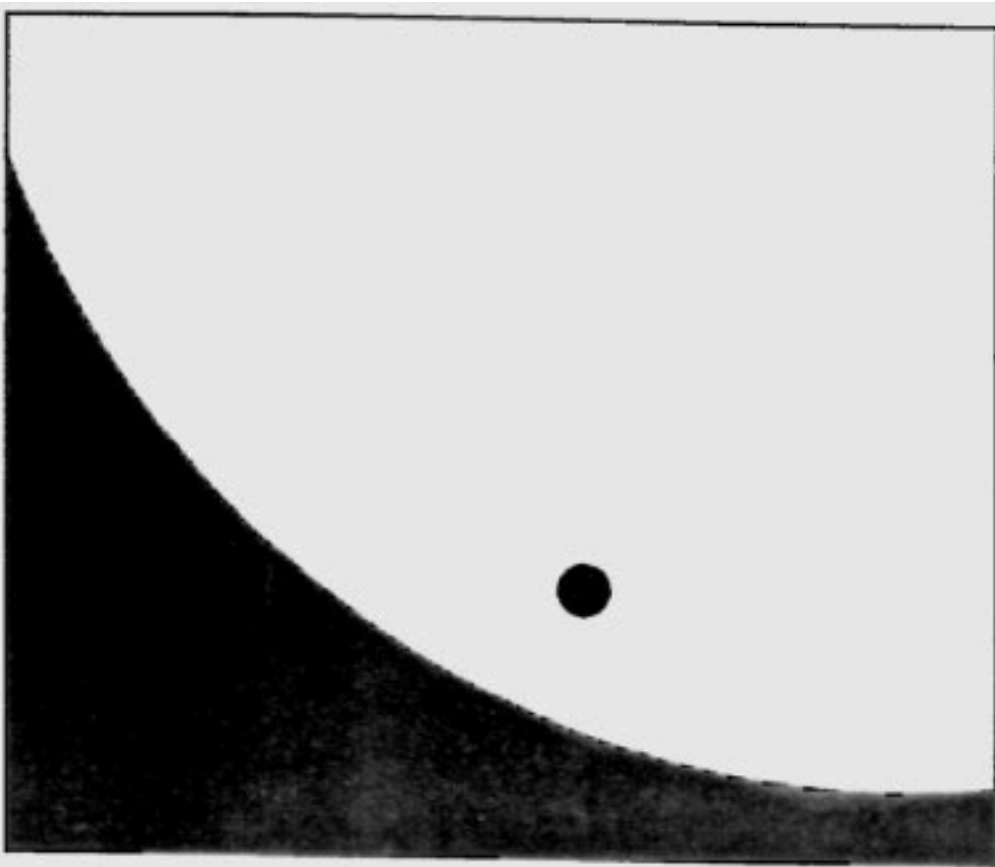
Planetariums the world over — from India's eastern city of Bhubaneswar to Boston — set up telescopes with eye-protecting solar filters.

In the United Arab Emirates, the Astronomical Society set up an air-conditioned tent, providing telescopes and lectures — along with chocolates and water for those coming in from the 111-degree heat.

"One day, I want to be a pilot and reach up there," said Naim Ramzi, a 10-year-old Palestinian, who was in the tent.

In Bahrain, state-run television aired documentaries on Venus. A group of science students at an observation point discussed whether they should collectively perform a special prayer often said during solar eclipses.

"Any phenomenon is related to religion, and we are Muslims. The simplest thing to do is to pray to God. We are thanking him on every occasion," said



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A small dark disc is seen crossing on the face of the sun as one of the rarest of celestial spectacles, a transit of Venus, is observed at Yokohama Science Center in Yokohama, south of Tokyo, today.

Mohammed Youssef, an assistant professor of physics.

In Greece, two American experts stationed themselves at opposite ends of the country — the southern island of Crete and the northern city of Thessaloniki — in hopes of unlocking the mystery behind the "black drop effect," which makes Venus appear teardrop shaped instead of a circle when it aligns with the edges of the sun.

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