

Astro-tourism takes off with solar eclipse

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THE PRICE is astronomical. So is the journey:

Air charter and tourism companies are surprised at the enthusiastic response to their canny offers to give Indians a close encounter with the total solar eclipse on July 22 for the cost of a round-trip ticket to New York.

Cox & Kings reports it has already sold half the 50 window seats on offer on the Boeing 737 it has hired for the two-hour journey from Delhi to Gaya in Bihar. Each ticket costs Rs 79,000.

"People understand the worth of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said Thomas Thottathil, spokesman for the tour operator. "We expect a good response for the remaining seats."

Airnetz Aviation, a Mumbai-based charter company, will also operate a solar eclipse "tour" on a luxury jet with eight seats at Rs 1 lakh a seat. Its spokesman, Ameya Gore, declined to reveal figures, but said the response was "good."

"We are experiencing a wave of popular enthu-

FROM THE AIR:

- You will get to see the eclipse, even if it is cloudy and raining
- You will get a clearer view
- You can see the moon's journey across the sun for between 20 and 70 minutes, instead of just three to four minutes

siasm for science," he said.

Gore might be overstating the case, but the excitement over the solar eclipse might just herald the birth of astro-tourism.

Three other air-charter companies, which did wish to be identified, said they would also operate flights on that day for select customers, most of who are high-ranking corporate executives. These charter companies said they would not charge these customers in cash, but set off the journey's cost against the hundreds of flying hours these customers have already bought for the year.

The companies declined to reveal names of those who had already paid up, but said that many were amateur astronomy enthusiasts.

On July 22, the moon will totally eclipse the sun after a decade and will not do so again until 2034.

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