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FOR YOUR INFORMATION
The Spokesman-Review
Spokane, Washington
Monday July 3, 2017
by Betsy Z. Russell
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August eclipse expected to draw big crowds to town of 5,500 in southern Idaho

WEISER, Idaho — Idaho is bracing for an influx of tourists from around the world on Aug. 21, all bent on viewing a singular event: the first coast-to-coast total eclipse of the sun in the United States since 1918.

Hotels, vacation rentals and even campgrounds along the “path of totality” have been booked for months — in some cases, for years.

And the small Idaho town of Weiser — a city of 5,500 best known for its annual old-time fiddlers festival — is at the epicenter. The National Solar Observatory, a division of NASA, rated Weiser as the No. 2 place in the nation to view the eclipse. No. 1 was Madras, Oregon, but because that tiny, remote town 50 miles north of Bend lacks services, it’s Weiser where an NSO team will head with a special high-powered telescope to do the official data collection.

So will tens of thousands of others, and Weiser will welcome them with a multiday Eclipse Festival, complete with concerts, car shows, a fun run, a street dance, family activities, a golf tournament, and on the morning of the eclipse, a pancake breakfast sponsored by the local Future Farmers of America.

Patrick Nauman, owner of Weiser Classic Candy in the center of Weiser’s downtown and chairman of the Eclipse Festival Committee, said, “The entire town is a viewing site.”

The tallest building in town is just four stories high, he said, and when the total eclipse hits at 11:25 a.m. local time, the sun will be nearly overhead. “Unless you’re standing under a tree, there won’t be a bad view,” he said.

Kim Wendelsdorf, manager of the Weiser Chamber of Commerce, responded to more than 100 email inquiries from prospective visitors last week alone. She’s been fielding calls, emails and letters for more than a year.

The oddest, she said, was one demanding the phone number or email of a local parking garage so the caller could reserve a parking spot. “We don’t have any parking garages,” Wendelsdorf said. The caller insisted that one certainly would be built in time for the eclipse.

“I said, ‘No, I’m sorry, but on the 22nd of August we will still be a town of 5,500, and we won’t need a parking garage,’” Wendelsdorf said with a laugh.

Weiser is expecting up to 60,000 people for the eclipse, including a group of 150 Japanese tourists who booked long in advance, and a group of 250 amateur astronomers. Nauman said, “We realized people aren’t just going to be arriving by carloads — there are going to be busloads.

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“We know we have visitors or groups from the U.K., Australia, Germany, Japan, Canada and Mexico,” Nauman said. Lots of locals have put up rooms for rent on AirBnB or VRBO; many have been snapped up by international visitors. That’s happening all along the path of totality, including in eastern Idaho. Boise doesn’t fall into the swath, but Idaho Falls, Rexburg, Stanley and Cascade do.

Nauman, who was born and raised in Weiser, said he’s hearing from lots of friends and neighbors that they’ll have 10 or so family members or friends camping out in their yard for the big event. “I’m going to be really surprised if every yard in town doesn’t have at least one camper or tent,” he said.

“Idaho is one of the best places in the world to observe the eclipse,” said Brian Jackson, a physics professor at Boise State University, who’s heard from people in Germany, Japan, Belgium, the Netherlands and more who are making the trip. That’s because of the combination of location within the path of totality and the chances for clear weather — clouds can obscure the whole event and are more likely in the eastern U.S.

A total solar eclipse last crossed Idaho in 1979, when the eclipse crossed over the Coeur d’Alene area. But this one will follow a diagonal track across the entire United States from Oregon to South Carolina, with a 70-mile-wide swath that cuts through 14 states. “This eclipse, for millions of people, is going to be visible either from their backyard or an hour’s drive,” Jackson said. “It’s probably going to be one of the most widely viewed eclipses in human history, just because of how accessible it is.”

An eclipse occurs when the moon moves in front of the sun, as seen from Earth. “When that happens, the sun basically winks out, and day becomes night, temperatures drop,” Jackson said. “It’s a very striking event. And it’s the sort of thing that really conks you over the head. You would definitely notice it.”

And only from the path of totality will the most spectacular part be visible: At the moment the moon fully obscures the sun, the glowing corona of the sun — which otherwise isn’t visible — shows up in a luminous crown around the dark disk.

It’s unsafe to view an eclipse — or look at the sun — without special eye protection. Eclipse glasses, with built-in filters that make it safe to look at the sun, are widely available for sale online; Weiser has made up its own, complete with eclipse logo and the date, and is selling them through the Chamber of Commerce, the local school district and more.

Total eclipses actually occur about every 18 months, Jackson said. “It’s just that the eclipse track is usually out over the ocean somewhere, so you’ve got to pay to get on a cruise ship in order to see it.”

With this one visible from across the United States, the National Solar Observatory will be sending teams to 60 sites, including Weiser, to film the eclipse and collect data on it; Weiser high school students and teachers are being trained to help with the data collection, and once it’s all over, the special high-powered telescope will be donated to the high school. The NSO’s lead data collectionist will be in Weiser, coordinating the national effort.

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Megan Ronk, director of the Idaho Department of Commerce, said, “We expect eclipse visitors to make a multimillion-dollar economic impact on local business and communities across the state.” It’s also occurring during the peak of the state’s tourism season, she noted.

For Weiser, the once-in-a-generation event follows one of the toughest winters the town has ever seen. Massive snowfall caved in roofs and brought business to a halt. “Our only grocery store in town went down,” Nauman said. “They’re in a temporary location about a third the size they used to be while they rebuild.”

But in downtown Weiser, excitement about the eclipse is visible. Along State Street in the center of town, just a block from Nauman’s candy store, the owner of a vacant storefront transformed it two weeks ago into a gift shop selling eclipse T-shirts, fresh herbs and more. Flowers are blooming in big, hanging pots along the downtown sidewalks; the local train depot is spiffed up and ready to host festival events.

“So in a way,” Nauman said, “this is kind of a gift from Mother Nature, after as hard a winter as we had.”

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