

The 2024 solar eclipse is over — Now what?

THIS YEAR'S ECLIPSE JUST SCRATCHES THE SURFACE OF ALL THE WAYS TO EXPERIENCE ASTROTOURISM IN THE NORTH COUNTRY.

By **Holly Riddle**

Whether you were one of the tens of thousands of visitors who witnessed this year's solar eclipse from the North Country, or you took it all in from elsewhere, if the event left you eager for more, there's good news: The Adirondacks are the perfect place to experience the growing astrotourism trend.

DEMYSTIFYING THE UNIVERSE

The hub of astrotourism — or tourism centered around astronomy — in the North Country is undoubtedly the Adirondack Sky Center and Observatory in Tupper Lake. The center is the only astronomy-based organization in the Adirondack Park and hosts the public, for free, in its observatory, as weather permits.

"It's well-organized. It's fun. It's educational," described president Seth McGowan. "It's a great experience to see things 58 million light years or so away, as well as things like Saturn or things that are right in our own neighborhood."

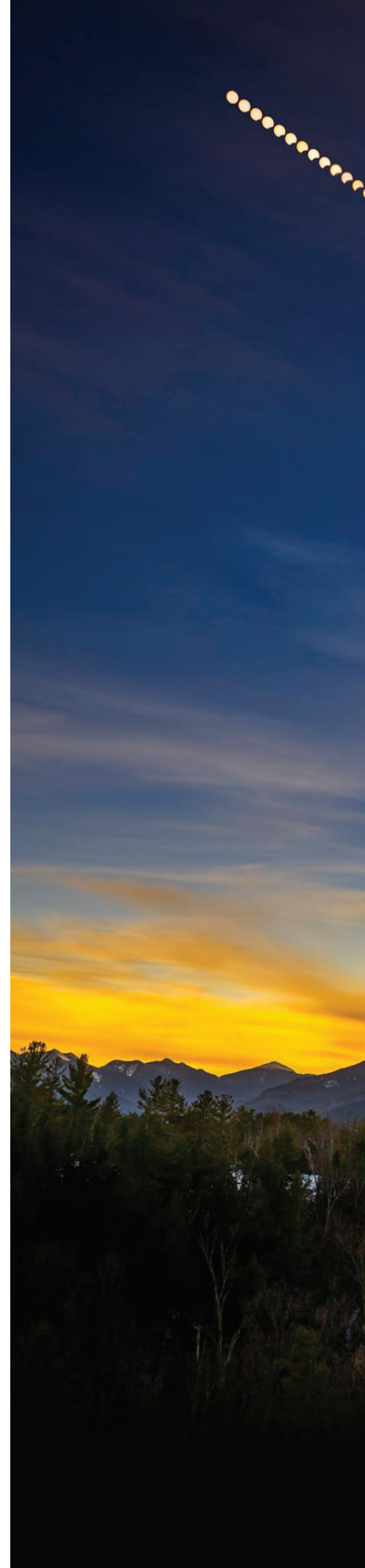
"We're really wanting to add a daytime program for solar viewing," he added, saying he's seen an increase in interest in

solar observing over the last year, due to the eclipse; during the eclipse, Tupper Lake alone welcomed about 15,000 visitors. "This is a very, very active time on the sun that comes in 11-year cycles... We're smack-dab in the middle of that period now, so there are a lot of solar flares. There's a lot of activity with sunspots. We're hoping to capitalize on that during the day, with solar viewing in addition to our nighttime observing programs."

The goal for all the center's programming is "to demystify the universe and make it accessible to everyone." As such, the center welcomes curious observers of all ages.

"You don't need an advanced degree in astrophysics to enjoy, understand and appreciate the universe in which we live," said McGowan.

The center is open for observing every Friday that the weather cooperates, but will also open throughout the week if the weather is clear. The best place to find up-to-date information on the center's opening hours is via social media or the center's email blasts, which visitors can sign up to receive at www.adirondackskycenter.org.



All photos by Dan Stein
(danieljstein.com)

CAPTURING THE COSMOS

However, for some visitors, simply witnessing the cosmos isn't enough. They want to capture what they see and share it with the world — and that's where astrophotography comes in. The Adirondacks attract astrophotographers from all over the country with its dark skies. The Adirondack Sky Center and Observatory has even begun hosting an annual astrophotography conference, where astrophotographers, astrophotography experts and educators come together to learn the artform in a hands-on setting.

David Craig is an accomplished astronomer and astrophotographer who moved to the Adirondacks from the Boston area more than 20 years ago. A retired electronic engineer, Craig said he had always been interested in science, engineering and astronomy. After he and his son purchased their first telescope in the 1990s, he brought his technical expertise to the hobby, and now Craig hosts what he calls "Impromptu Stargazing" sessions, at Norton Cemetery in Keene, complete with an expert setup that includes a motorized 8-inch aperture telescope with a built-in computer and star catalog, and that can track star movements; an equatorial wedge allowing polar alignment; a secondary auto-guider telescope outfitted with a Raspberry Pi-powered camera; and a heavy tripod. Along with other amateur astronomers, locals and travelers, he then proceeds to capture some of the imagery you can see on Craig's website, neophyteastronomer.org.

There's no need to be quite so technical with your stargazing and astrophotography, though. Craig noted that, just for stargazing, a pair of binoculars and a tripod will fit a newbie.

Dan Stein, an astrophotographer who's received attention for his work in the Adirondacks, corroborated this, saying that today's cell phones and a tripod are enough for one to dip their toe into astrophotography (and for those who need a little extra help getting started, he offers a range of tutorials on his website, danieljstein.com).

That said, Craig did mention the limitations that come with attempting to photograph the stars with just a cell phone or DSLR. He said, "If you have a camera with manual controls, like a DSLR camera, and you put it on a tripod and point it up, depending on what focal length lens you have, you can take maybe a 30-second exposure, roughly... What happens after that is the stars begin to smear out, because the earth is rotating and the sky is moving, so as long as you leave the shutter open and you're taking in a field of stars, the stars are moving and, as they do, they leave trails [of light] behind them. The longer you leave the shutter open, the more pronounced it is."

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A VERY REAL THREAT

It's worth noting that, while the North Country is currently an excellent spot for stargazing, astrophotography and similar activities, that doesn't mean it always will be; light pollution is a very real threat.

On a national scale, according to the Regional Office of Sustainable Tourism, only about 20% of Americans can see the Milky Way where they live, due to light pollution, and, globally, light pollution is increasing by 10% annually. Currently, the Adirondacks offers a small sliver of the planet wherein you can usually see the Milky Way and most of the park is defined as a Class 2 on the Bortle Scale; the Bortle Scale measures light pollution and a Class 2 site is a "typical truly dark site."

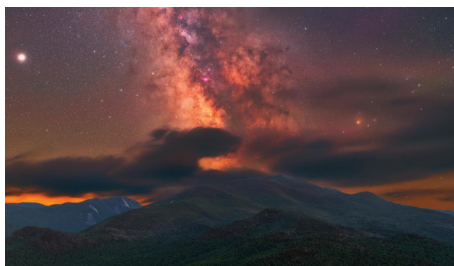
McGowan is one of the individuals working to ensure the region stays this way — and gets even darker. Along with the Tupper Lake community, he's been working to achieve International Dark Sky Association designation, which would name Tupper Lake an official dark sky community. The process, though, is a lengthy one, and takes multiple years. However, McGowan feels positive.

"I can't say enough about how proactive Tupper Lake is [regarding light pollution]," he said. "When there's a new project proposed, I always get a phone call. I'm sort of the unofficial lighting consultant for the town of Tupper Lake."

Craig noted that one of the reasons he started inviting visitors and locals alike to come out for his stargazing sessions was to bring more attention to light pollution and "how truly good we have it in the Adirondacks," he said.

"Light pollution is getting worse," he added, "and people can help by just thinking about it."

Stein likewise said, "As much as I love how dark the Adirondacks are, I do think there could be — and there is starting to be — more regulations for what certain towns can use for outdoor lighting. Lake Placid is getting extremely bright, [as is] Saranac Lake... If one of the tourism draws for the region is dark skies, it's important to start remembering to implement some dark sky-friendly changes."



PACK YOUR ITINERARY WITH ASTRONOMICAL EXCELLENCE

So, whether you're just interested in simple stargazing, or you have astrophotography aspirations, what should you add to your sky-watching itinerary this summer?

Beyond visiting the Adirondack Sky Center and Observatory or joining Craig for impromptu stargazing (you can find out when these impromptu sessions are occurring by signing up for Craig's mailing list, at neophyteastronomer.org), consider finding your own stargazing and astrophotography spots. Craig recommended finding a large, open space, like Marcy Field, in Keene. Stein also mentioned Marcy Field, as well as Heart Lake at the Adirondack Loj.

Hoping to catch another astronomical event like the eclipse? Stein mentioned several to keep on your radar, including upcoming Supermoons; the Perseids Meteor Shower, Aug. 12–13; and, next March, a total lunar eclipse.

For guided experiences, John Brown State Historic Site in Lake Placid hosts star-watching events on a regular basis; more information can be found on the site's Facebook page. In Plattsburgh, the Northcountry Planetarium likewise hosts public programming, and more information can be found at www.plattsburgh.edu/academics/planetarium.

Lastly, consider following the Adirondack Sky Center and Observatory on Facebook for more information regarding its upcoming \$12 million capital campaign, to raise funds to build a planetarium in Tupper Lake. Once completed, the town will have the unique distinction of being home to both an observatory and a planetarium, a combination not often seen. 🌟