

Solar eclipse

Esquire design columnist
CYRIL ZAMMIT on the sun
being our best worst enemy



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABDULLAH TOUK

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OF CONCENTRATED
SOLAR POWER***

What curious times we live in. Like many of you, I hoped to trade the dry desert heat for the cooler breezes of the European summer.

Although Mother Nature had different plans, as record highs and droughts rocked the Old Continent, while back here at home we witnessed some unseasonably, dramatic storms. It's that constant reminder that despite us believing we can do what we want – she is still in charge.

Summer 2022 was a sharp awakening. While we (naively) started acting like the worst was behind us, new problems of our own doing began to raise their heads. Aside from freak weather and skyrocketing petrol prices, it was airport chaos that impacted many of us directly. The lack of planning and staff management left planes full of people on tarmac and luggage scattered all over the world – sparking a wider concern of the impact of mass tourism.

Fortunate enough to make a trip to Mexico with my luggage by my side, I was looking forward to climbing the high steps up to the famed Mayan temples of the Sun and Moon in Yucatan. Sadly, the experience has changed somewhat since my last trip back in 2005. Pre-dawn treks have been swapped for an army of tour buses carting selfie-seeking tourists up to the top so that people can take a quick snap – of themselves rather than the temples – and then choosing which Instagram filter to use on the ride back down to the hotel before the breakfast buffet closes.

In Mayan culture the Sun god, Kinich Ahau, was depicted as a poorly-dressed, old man with crossed eyes and a prominent nose. He mocked those who worshipped him, knowing that he was all-powerful and there was nothing that the people could do about it. It is a cruel symmetry to what is happening today with the rise in temperatures causing havoc as we desperately try to find solutions to survive.

Scientists are working on it, designers too. Earlier this year, a team from the Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam spent a few days in the UAE, preparing the first edition of the Solar Biennale that will be held in the Netherlands next October. This month the first part of it – the Energy Show – will open in Rotterdam, demonstrating the capacity to leverage solar energy and help the energy transition. Solutions found on this occasion will have a tremendous ecological and social impact for our own and the future generations.

Currently, the UAE is ranked third in the world in the production of concentrated solar power (CSP). In Dubai alone the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park already provides clean energy for 320,000 residences (1.6 million tonnes of carbon emissions reduction) per year.

Even though the Mayans saw a man as god of sun, the modern reality made a woman the Solar Queen in the 20th century. It is thanks to the remarkable work of Mária Telkes that the solar-powered desalination machine and oven were invented. The Hungarian-American biophysicist and scientist should be considered as our saviour and be celebrated as such – maybe without the Mayan ritual human sacrifices. ☹️

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