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Voyages of discovery

By **DENNIS CULVER**
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In 2002, Michael Toomey and his wife, Heidi, were planning a getaway and wanted something out of the ordinary. They wanted an experience that evades most people for a lifetime.

This led them to Continental Capers Travel, a local travel agency in Gainesville. Through its trips, appropriately named Voyages of Discovery, Continental Capers offers travelers a chance to experience one of the most breathtaking astronomical experiences visible from Earth: a total eclipse of the sun.

Toomey has been an amateur astronomer for 10 years and is currently the president of the Alachua Astronomy Club. Through his involvement with the club, Toomey met Howard and Marian Cohen, the people behind the idea of the Voyages of Discovery trips.

"We chose the trip because of Howard's convincing people that a solar eclipse is a very special event," Toomey said.

An astronomical idea
Howard Cohen, 65, is an emeritus professor of astronomy at the University of Florida and taught at the school for more than 35 years, retiring in 2003, and his wife, Marian, 63, works for Continental Capers in Gainesville and has been a travel consultant for 25 years.

The Cohens came up with the idea for Voyages of Discovery in 1991, when they went to see a solar eclipse (when the moon comes directly between the Earth and the Sun) in Mexico.

"The eclipse was in Baja, Calif., and we basically didn't think (the company that planned the trip) did a good job with the travel arrangements, and while we were there, we said that we could do better than this," recalls Marian. "It's a great combination, having an astronomer and a travel agent."

It is Howard's love for astronomy, since age 11, that has served as the catalyst for these astronomy-tinged trips. By combining an astronomical event and a tour through some of the most beautiful landscapes on Earth, these trips offer an experience that is not only unique but could prove to be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Solar eclipses are not that uncommon. A total solar eclipse will happen about twice a year, but they can prove very difficult to access. It is the size of the eclipse path that makes seeing one so special.

The average path of a solar eclipse is only 100 to 150 miles wide. It will travel along its path for up to 4,000 miles. The



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Marian Cohen, left, a travel consultant with Continental Capers Travel, Bruce MacFadden, a University of Florida professor of zoology and geology, and Howard Cohen, seated, emeritus professor of astronomy at UF, will lead a fall trip to visit geological sites in Arizona.



eclipse can only be seen while you are in the path. With 70 to 75 percent of the Earth's surface covered in water, much of it vast oceans, eclipse paths are often in places inaccessible to most. When accessible, the eclipse's partial phases can be seen for about one hour on each side of totality, with the totality of the eclipse visible for 30 seconds to seven minutes.

"Most Americans have not seen a total solar eclipse," Howard said. "Many people who see one become eclipse chasers."

There has not been a total eclipse in the continental U.S. since 1979, and there will not be another until 2017. The rarity of seeing such an event is what makes these trips so appealing to people.

"Photographs don't give justice to the event," Toomey said. "They don't come close. There are no words to describe it."

The Cohens have planned seven trips to such exotic locations as Tahiti, Italy, Athens, Australia, Africa and the Caribbean, with each trip focusing on an astronomical event particular to that area at that time. Along with trips planned around eclipses, there was a trip taken to Western Europe in 2004 to view a transit of Venus, a rare astronomical event in which Venus' orbit takes it between the Earth and Sun, making the planet's silhouette visible in the body of the Sun.

Though many of the trips are geared toward a particular event, the trips are designed for a broad study of Earth's natural beauty as well.

"The astronomical event is an excuse to visit places and do things that you would not ordinarily do," Howard said. "The trips are orientated toward nature. They are not simply astronomy. Even if there would have been bad weather for the eclipse, the trip still would have been worth it."

"You have to realize that sometimes it is going to be cloudy, and you will get clouded out, but since we have this fabulous trip around it, if we get clouded out, which we haven't been, luckily, you still get this trip to a very interesting place," Marian said.

On the trip to Australia in 2002, the group visited many of the continent's natural wonders, including the rainforests, the Great Barrier Reef and Kangaroo Island, a secluded island off the southern coast of Australia that has only had electricity since about 1985. The group also spent several days in Sydney, but the main focus was on the natural geology of the region.

In 2001, the tour made its way through Southern Africa to chase down a solar eclipse. In Florida, it is common to see deer on the side of the road while driving down the interstate, but on the Africa trip, the group frequently drove alongside wild lions and other native African wildlife.

"Most people don't go to Africa, so you get to see Southern Africa as well as an eclipse of the sun," Howard said. "At one lodge we stayed at in Zimbabwe, you look out of your room over a large grassy area, and your looking over a waterhole where all the elephants and other animals came."

Learning, observing

Those involved in the trips provided by Continental Capers say these Voyages of Discovery can be best described as very unique experiences.

In an effort to keep the experience as interesting and intimate as possible, the Cohens limit the number of people they bring on the trips.

"We only take up to 30 people, because we like that interaction with the people and the intimacy," said Marian.

The smaller groups gives people on the tour greater access to the experts and guides leading the expeditions. It also gives each traveler a better opportunity to explore in more depth and detail the natural beauty of the places on the itinerary.

"You're going to get a very intimate, personal, educational and entertaining experience," Howard said. "They are getting a personal tour that they otherwise would not get."

Howard says it is these experts who help set Voyages of Discovery apart from other guided trips. Guests receive the expertise of scientists with years of experience as well as local experts who have first-hand experience of the land.

Bruce MacFadden, professor of zoology and geology at UF, will be the geological expert accompanying the Cohens on the next scheduled Voyages of Discovery trip, which is destined for Arizona, departing on Sept. 21. It will be his first trip with the Continental Capers tour.

MacFadden is the associate director of Exhibits and Public Programming and curator of Vertebrate Paleontology at the Florida Museum of Natural History. He has almost 30 years of professional experience, and has taught courses in physical and historical geology, paleomagnetism, evolution and vertebrate paleontology.



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"I'm going to be the naturalist who helps the people who go out on the tour to interpret the geology of this area," MacFadden said. "I hope to be able to help the people on the tour to appreciate the incredible natural beauty of the Grand Canyon and the other geological sites we will be seeing on this trip."

The Arizona trip slightly varies from the company's previous trips, because it is not designed specifically around an astronomical event. Guests will visit various observatories and telescopes, but a great deal of the trip will be dedicated to the natural beauty of the Arizona landscape.

A great deal of planning goes into each of these trips, and the one to Arizona is no different. Howard does most of the organizing for the trip itinerary and takes even the smallest details into consideration.

September was chosen as the date because it provides the group with time in Arizona right after the tourist season and summer heat but before the cold weather of fall sets in on the high plateaus. This time of year is also ideal to see the beautiful fall foliage of the Arizona forests.

Because so much time and effort is needed in the planning of the Voyages of Discovery, Continental Capers only offers one to two trips per year. After the Arizona trip, there are tentative plans for a trip to New York City to tour Rose Center's Hayden Planetarium, the Metropolitan Opera and Radio City Music Hall later this year, and a trip in March of 2006 to Egypt to view a solar eclipse. The trip to Egypt will also include trips to the Egyptian Museum, the pyramids and a Nile cruise.

With those trips in the preliminary stages of planning, MacFadden and the Cohens are putting full effort into making sure the Arizona trip, a mere three months away, meets the expectations and successfulness of previous trips around the globe.

"Here you have a custom trip. This is the only trip of its kind," MacFadden said. "You can't just surf the Net and look for other trips that would compete with this. There is nothing like this trip. It is unique, luxurious and wonderful."

For more information about Continental Capers and Voyages of Discovery visit www.flycapers.com.

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