

The Green Flash

I've seen the green flash three times--once from the flight deck of a missile cruiser, the USS Lake Champlain, once from the dining room on a beach near La Jolla, California, and once from a cliff overlooking Swami's surfing beach near Carlsbad, California. I've also been to the Green Flash Restaurant on Captiva Island off the southwest coast of Florida.

What is the green flash, you say? Well, it's an optical phenomenon that occasionally occurs just as the sun disappears below the horizon when clouds don't obscure the sun. Light from the sun is refracted and colors separated near the horizon. Green light appears last as the rim of the sun disappears. The green flash, when it occurs, only lasts for a second or so and leaves the observer uncertain if he saw it or wondering if his eyes were playing tricks on him.

The first time I saw the green flash, another person standing nearby saw it simultaneously and we immediately asked each other if we had really seen it. We were both looking directly at the sun as it grew smaller and dimmer and plunged into the sea. The flash happened so quickly, was so bright, and of such a completely different color than the red of the sun, we weren't confident we hadn't blinked, and our brains had manufactured the flash.

The second and third times I saw a green flash, I knew what to expect, but it was so quick, I was still surprised. Flashes only occur occasionally, so most of the time you are disappointed. But, whenever I watch a sunset over the ocean when there are no clouds, I always look for a green flash.

When visiting the Green Flash Restaurant in Florida with our friends, Al and Lin McNab, we were disappointed to find that the restaurant faced east over the ocean. How was it possible to see a green flash from there? We finally concluded the restaurant's name was just selected as an oddity of interest to sailors. Years later I found that a green flash can also be observed at sunrise when the horizon is clear of clouds.

However, that little tidbit of information is not what sticks in my memory from the pleasant meal we had together. It was an experience in the men's restroom

that shocked my friend, Al, and I. After ordering our meal and before the food arrived, we visited the "head." While using the urinals we noticed movement behind the mirrored wall we faced. Through the wall we could vaguely make out the bartenders behind the bar in the dining room we had just left. Between the bottles on the wall we viewed them mixing drinks and serving customers in the dining room beyond.

Suddenly Al and I felt exposed to the world and our bathroom activity was summarily suspended. We zipped up and sheepishly walked out of the toilet and peered around the corner of the bar to see the bartenders mixing drinks. Behind the bar was a mirrored wall covered with bottles on the shelves we had just been looking through. The wall was completely opaque, and we could see no activity through the wall from the front side. One of the bartenders saw us inspecting the wall and exclaimed, "Gotcha!"