

SCOTLAND 2003



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INTRODUCTION

My astronomy hobby includes chasing solar eclipses. Solar eclipses occur when the Moon passes in front of the Sun in the course of its orbit. Perhaps one or two times a year there is a narrow strip across the Earth where this event is visible. This time, an annular solar eclipse was visible in the northern Atlantic, in Scotland, Iceland, and Greenland. An annular eclipse occurs when the Moon appears smaller than the Sun - the Sun appears to be like a ring. Another condition is the total eclipse, when the Moon appears bigger than the Sun and blocks the Sun out completely, turning day into night.

I wanted to save up my vacation time at work for some grander trips later in the year, so this trip had to be short and sweet. I had four days to fly from San Diego, California to Scotland and back. Some people think I'm crazy for taking such a short vacation, but I figure it's got to be better than sitting in front of the TV or computer screen. I've done crazier things, including flying from California to Washington D.C. one day and returning the next afternoon. A person can do a lot if they plan well enough...

THE ECLIPSE

Scotland has notoriously bad weather. I had booked a hotel room in the town of Thurso on the northern coast, with plans to head west to Durness, or east to John O' Groats, depending on the weather. The day before the eclipse I drove from Fort William, through Durness, to Thurso. This trip took a lot longer than I expected. The drive from Durness to Thurso alone took two hours down winding single-lane roads, so by the time I arrived in Thurso (late at night) I was so tired I decided that I was NOT going all the way back to Durness. Going back to Durness would mean giving up an entire night's sleep.

After a quick rest I headed out to Dunnet Head, the most northerly point in Scotland (and thus the UK). I wanted to survey the area. I was met with bad news; the sky was thickly overcast. Below is a photo of the lighthouse on Dunnet Head that night. On the way back to the hotel, just before midnight, it RAINED.



I decided that Durness was too far, and Dunnet Head was too foggy, so I would go to Duncansby Head or John O' Groats. After a quick nap, I left for Duncansby Head at 3am. I stopped in John O' Groats and to my dismay it was very foggy, so I continued on to Duncansby Head. Our progress slowed to a crawl; the road is a single lane and when there is oncoming traffic you have to pull over to let them pass. Why was everybody leaving?

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FOG. Tons of it, blowing stiffly in clumps and streams, with visibility dipping to the tens of meters.



We returned to John O' Groats. Maybe the fog would lift after sunrise. Maybe... Maybe not. Well past the predicted time of sunrise the sky hadn't even brightened. A group of folks took off in a boat to see if they could get past the fog out at sea.

They returned rather quickly, so it must have been bad out there. We had nothing to do

but sit, talk, and wait. As the appointed time for annularity came, we noticed that it got

much darker.

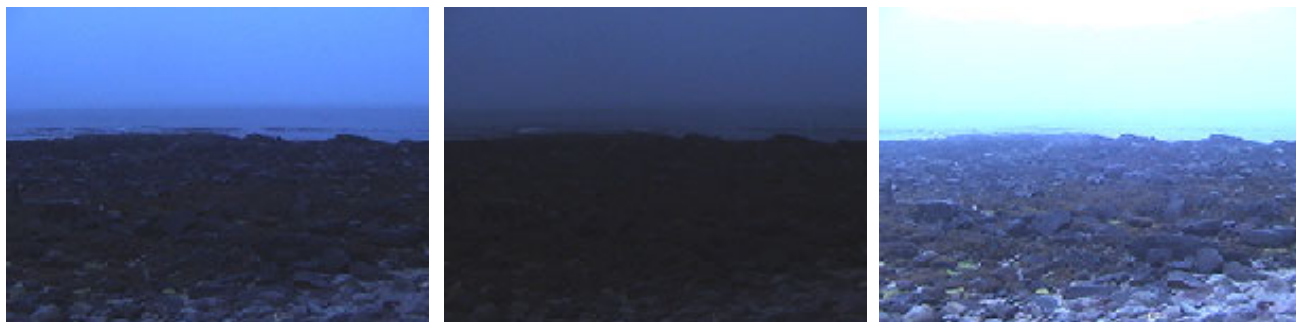
We were in the right place at the right time, but we wouldn't get to see the show. Below is a photo of the crowd gathered on the beach, during annularity. All of my camera equipment is ready and waiting in the lower left.



Next is a view into the Sun, showing how bad the clouds were.

On the next page are three frames, extracted from my video of the eclipse. The camera's exposure was locked, so you can see the true darkening around the time of annularity. The bluish sky color is not real, that's from my camera attempting to make the bland grey skies more interesting.





I waited another half hour to try and see the partial phase after the eclipse, but the clouds didn't even budge. I gave up and returned to my hotel for a couple more hours of sleep. Oh well, maybe next time!

In hindsight, I should have gotten going earlier the previous morning so that I would have had time to return to Durness. The weather was much better there and they got to see the eclipse. I don't mind missing the eclipse, because I saw so many other things in Scotland that the trip was very worthwhile and I wouldn't hesitate to do it again.



Starting on the next page is the story of my travels around Scotland...

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WEDNESDAY MAY 28 2003

CALIFORNIA TO GLASGOW

This trip seemed slow to get started. I went in to work early in the morning, did my best to wrap up things, and left work around lunchtime. My parents and I met up and started the trek up to the Los Angeles airport. We stopped for lunch at the Costco in Carlsbad, near the Carlsbad Flower Fields. Finally we made it up to the airport and parked the car in the long term parking lot at the end

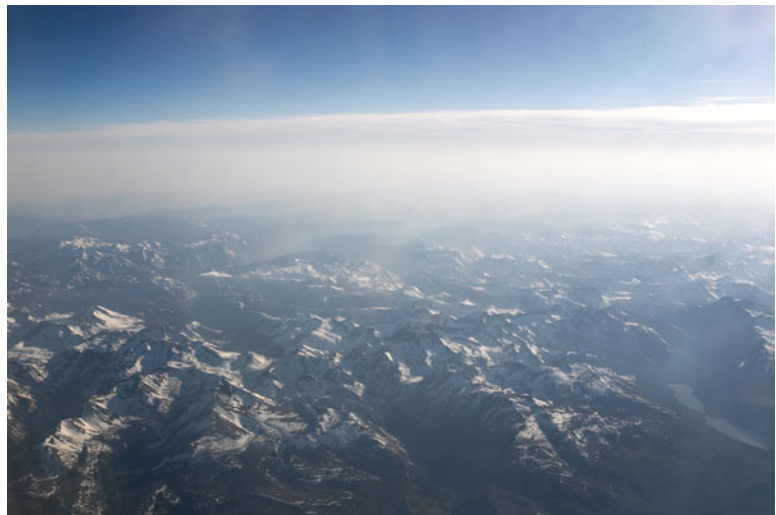


of the runway.

We checked in and headed for the gate, where we saw our airplane. I never get tired of seeing massive aircraft like this Boeing 747. After takeoff the plane headed due north, a little unexpected but not unwelcome. We passed over the San Andreas fault, the central valley, and began seeing snow in the mountains. In the distance I saw a gouge in the earth that seemed fa-

miliar. I then realized I was looking at the famous Yosemite Valley.

We continued on up and passed Lake Tahoe as the Sun began to set. Our now northeast track meant that we were flying along the day/night terminator so the sunset lasted for HOURS. In fact, as I tried to go to sleep it was still bright twilight...



THURSDAY MAY 29 2003

GLASGOW TO FORT WILLIAM



I think I got a few hours of sleep, a big accomplishment because I can NEVER seem to sleep on planes. When I awoke it was daylight outside, and we were nearing the Scottish coast. I caught my first glimpses of the green hills, forests, and quaint towns between the clouds. Uh oh, I came to see the Sun and clouds are not welcome on this trip.

We landed at Heathrow Airport in London. After changing planes we were back on our way to Scotland. After a quick flight we landed at Glasgow airport. We collected our bags, picked up our rental car, and headed out.

Our destination for the night was a town called Roy Bridge, near Fort William. We hopped on the A82 highway and headed north.



Well, if there was any doubt about our location it was gone at this point, because we got stuck behind a truckload of Scotch Whiskey!

We passed some gorgeous homes, and before long we were driving along the banks of Loch Lomond. We stopped in the small town of Aldochlay for some pho-



tos. It was peaceful, green, and just like what we see on the British TV shows we get in America.





Continuing north we passed through Tarbet and found a nice turnout. The water was stiller here, and the warm evening light was very calming. We could see down the length of Loch Lomond, back

towards Glasgow.

After that nice break we noticed the road began to get smaller. At some points the road is only one lane wide, with stoplights in place to indicate when it is safe to proceed down it! We made another stop near Inveruglas, where



the water was so still it was like a glass mirror lain on the ground. Across the Loch we could see the Inversnaid Hotel, the lone human imprint in a sea of green and brown. Well, not including that old tire, of course!



After passing the Loch the terrain changed. Instead of steep mountains we saw steep mountains separated by wide meadows. We began seeing a



lot of the yellow Gorse bushes that are found all over Scotland. The vegetation petered out, leaving just low scrub and an occasional tree. We entered the famous Glen Coe area,



made famous in movies like *Braveheart*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. We saw beautiful waterfalls, soaring peaks, and an abundance of clouds and moisture.

No, that's not our hotel at left. I wish it



was! The drive along the coast was very pleasant, and it was strange to think that this leads out to the same Atlantic ocean we know in the U.S.A.!

With cattle in the roadway, we made a detour to the south to see another

Monty Python filming location. On a small island sits a small castle known as Castle Stalker, or more famously as Monty Python's Castle Arrgh!

Gasoline (petrol) is getting really expensive out here. The worst I saw was £0.90 per liter, or about US\$5.58 per gallon if I did my math right. Triple what we pay in the USA.

We arrived in Roy Bridge tired and hungry, only to be met with frustrating news. We had booked two hotel rooms and only one was available. Due to a bookkeeping error the second room had been occupied. Not to worry, the hotel keeper told us, just down the block is the Homagen B&B with a room. It was small, basic, and cheap (£15) but all I needed.



For dinner we had the quintessential "pub" experience. We didn't want to go back to Fort William just for dinner, so we ate at the hotel's downstairs pub. The place was packed and we ended up sharing a table with some nice folks who had just come from where we were going. We picked up some good tips from them (see the Castle of Mey and the Grey Cairns of Camster later in the report). It was great fun to get the full experience. We fell into bed tired but happy.

FRIDAY MAY 30 2003

FORT WILLIAM TO THURSO

I slept very well, the only disturbance was in the wee hours when the pub across the street let out a drunken mass of revelers. In the morning I got a rude surprise, I couldn't figure out how to flush the toilet! I've never understood european toilets, because in the USA you just push the flush handle briefly and the job is done. I finally determined (after much trial



and error) that here you have to push really hard really fast and hold for a really long time. Anything less just makes a short "woosh" noise and no results.

We took our time in the morning, and decided to backtrack to Fort William to get some supplies. Today we would be heading into the real Scottish wilderness, an area about as developed as Alaska or the Australian bush, so we needed

some food with us. On the way into town we sighted portions of the famous Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Great Britain. The hotel and Fort William are at the foot of it. We could see snowcapped peaks in between the clouds. The foreground was dotted with sheep and wonderful old stone buildings.

Fort William was a cir-



cus, apparently there was some big mountain biking competition going on. We filled up with snacks and money at the grocery store. While waiting in the parking lot several military jets went screaming overhead at high speed, they use this region for training. This reminded me of home, where we experience similar overflights all the time.

Heading back up the



A82 we passed the Commando Memorial near Spean Bridge, backdropped by a cloud-swathen Ben Nevis. We saw a lot of Gorse bushes. Not too long after, we came to a rather uninspiring long, narrow lake that I'm sure you've heard of: Loch Ness. Home of the Loch Ness Monster. It took a while before we had a decent view of it. We stopped at Urquhart Castle, a

ruin towards the upper end of the lake. They had some nice displays, but being pressed for time we didn't bother to go inside.

The Monster has been refuted and disproven but the local businessfolk don't want you to know that. The shore is lined with tourist





traps and kitsch that would make Midwest Americans proud. Standing outside the Loch Ness Nessie Shop I felt something beside me... what's that? Oh, another tourist trap!

The next stop was Inverness. I don't like Inverness. It seems like a dirty old town that has grown into an industrial zone without regard for its past (see lower left photo). It has nice bits here and there, but

overall I feel no need to ever come back here. This first picture (lower right corner) is of the Castle, looking up one of the parapits. On the next page is the Old High Church, looking very spooky with ominous clouds and an old graveyard (next page, top right).





Oddly, the next view (lower right) was taken from *inside* the McDonald's fast food restaurant downtown. At the McDonald's (I'm not going to even attempt to hide the fact that I had had enough of British cooking at this point) we waited in line and then placed our order. The young girl taking our order at the counter had an accent that seemed very odd and out of place. She asked where we were from. "A little town called Ramona, in Southern California" we replied. With great delight she told us she was from Temecula, a town just a few miles up the highway from my home! That odd accent was in fact the very same one we were speaking!





We continued north, this time in a northwesterly direction on the A835. The terrain changed back to the treeless high mountained landscape we had seen in Glen Coe (previous page, lower left). We came to Loch Broom, and then to the town of Ullapool (above). This is salt water now, connected to the Atlantic ocean. Theoretically one could put in a boat, row

southwest, and end up someplace like New York. Further up the coast was Ardmair, where we turned back inland to the northeast (above).

Wasteland punctuated by mountain peaks describes most of this territory. It got very lonely, the traffic was dying down, there were no more cities, towns, or anything else of any size. If you go here, be sure to fill up your gas tank because there ain't no service stations out



here! Near Loch Awe we sighted deer, a real treat. Shortly afterward we saw some

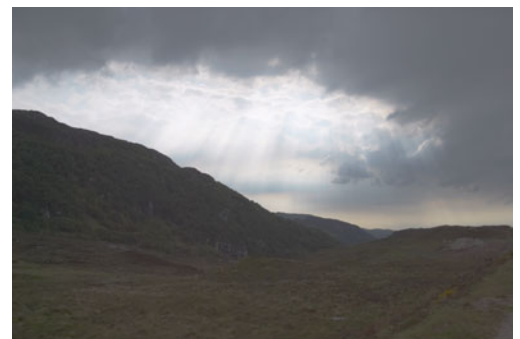


wonderful multi-colored cliffs along the River Loanan (see top of next page for photo).

Upon rounding a bend we sighted an old ruin in the distance, known as Ardvreck. After that my spirits began to improve. To this point in the trip it had been



cloudy and dreary, but now there we beams of sunlight poking through here and there, which gave way to great holes in the clouds.



The yellow ground suddenly became so yellow as to be unbelievable. This time it was the Gorse bushes, carpeting the land around



Kylestrome like freeways in Los Angeles. The Sun kept fighting the clouds, and shortly after turning onto the A838 near Skerricha I caught sight of a beautiful lake, complete with sunlit mountains and a fishing boat. I bolted out of the car and ran for a good spot to take a picture from, but by the time I got there and pushed the shutter



button the clouds had closed up. Oh well, it's still a decent picture.

The road became narrower and narrower. In places now there was only one lane, and upon meeting oncoming traffic you are forced to stop at the nearest turnout. We saw evidence of peat cutting, where the ground is sliced up, dried, and taken inside homes to be burned for heat.





We were now driving about as far northwest as one can in Great Britain. The clouds began to open up, with great stretches of blue sky toward the northwest. We came to the lonely town of Durness, whose population has surely multiplied several times over from the influx of eclipse chasers like me. They were camped all over. This was one of two places I had figured I could observe the eclipse from,

but this being such a small town, accomodation was not available for miles around. We stopped at the visitor center and read about the weapons testing in the area.



Down a few steps from the Visitor Center was Sango Bay, a very nice beach. Continuing east towards our final destination, we saw that the beaches were dotted with folks camping out, presumably





waiting for the eclipse tomorrow morning.

Further east the sky clouded completely over and we were mired in the hazy, drab muck that accomplishes nothing. If it's gonna rain, then rain, otherwise please be sunny!



The drabness was broken by a nice cluster of flowers by the side of the road (above right). In the background is Druim Nan Cliar. Stepping back reveals Loch Hope and some abandoned boats.

It seemed to be taking forever to get anywhere. Not only did sheep get in the way near the town of Strathy, but we had to



wait for farm equipment too. As you can see, we spent a good deal of time on one lane roads! All of this was adding up to



make us very late and very tired when we finally arrived at our hotel in Thurso. We had to stay in Thurso because it was the only place with rooms still available: as you can tell from the previous images there aren't many places to stay up here.

At this point is where the eclipse story picks up. If you haven't read it already, please go back to page 3. I'm going to skip over the eclipse stuff and jump to the point where we checked out of our hotel in Thurso, several hours after the eclipse on the morning of the 31st.

SATURDAY MAY 31 2003

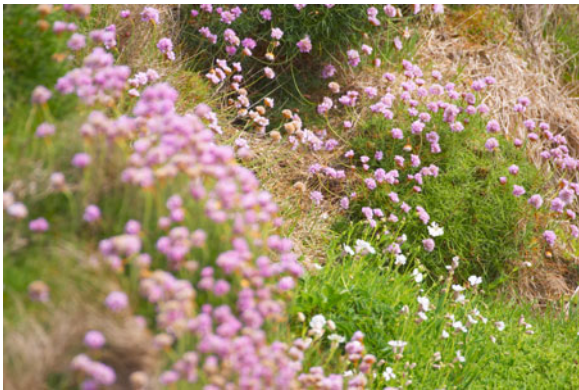
THURSO TO EDINBURGH

After catching what sleep we could after the early morning jaunt, we headed back east, retracing our steps. We could now see what we had missed while driving in the night: farmland, grassy hills, and even the Castle of Mey, the Queen Mother's former residence. It is now open to the public for tours, but we had to pass it up because of our tight schedule.

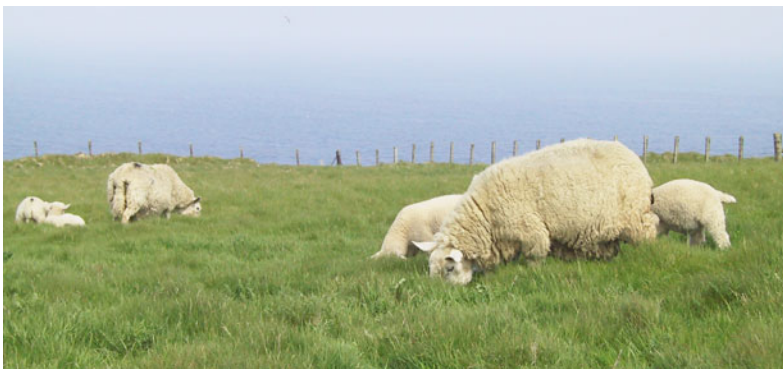


We revisited John O' Groats, now sunny but with a thick cloak of haze. The Orkney Ferry arrived and began unloading while we strolled around the area we had previously bumped around in earlier this morning. This whole town is another tourist trap; there really isn't anything very interesting here. It's only "claim" to fame is being at the opposite end of the UK from Land's End. That claim





isn't justified, because Dunnet Head (just west of here, see lighthouse picture in eclipse section) is the



northernmost point, and Duncansby Head (to the east) seems more deserving of the "end of the world" title. John O' Groats feels like just another beachside town.



The photo at top left on the facing page is of the lighthouse on Duncansby Head, do you see what I mean about "end of the world"? This wonderful place is marked by dizzying cliffs, and abundance of

birds and just enough sheep to make walking a messy proposition. Walking a short distance south reveals the Duncansby Stacks an array of cone-shaped towers of rocks. Driving out of the area we saw a few of the Highland cattle, with long flowing hair.



South, along a narrow road (watch out for cattle, sheep, or goats laying on the road) are the Grey Cairns of Camster. These are 5,000 year old burial chambers, made of piled stones. They have been restored and made safe, and the former oc-



cupants have been relocated, so you can actually crawl inside them. The gate is to keep the sheep out. It's no easy crawl, you need to be in sturdy jeans, and you WILL get mud on your knees, but it's worth it. It's very spooky in the tunnel, but once inside the actual chamber the roof is high enough to enable people to stand up.



After a mind-numbingly boring drive we stopped for lunch in Helmsdale. The two restaurants in town are competing to be the kitchiest; we ate in the one with walls, floor, and ceiling covered in Hollywood memorabilia. Arrows used in "Gladiator", signed photos, and everything else Hollywood.



A bit further south on the A9 is Dunrobin Castle. Again, because we were pressed for time we had to skip the inside tour; we walked around the outside a bit before piling back in the car to continue south.





We passed through Inverness again, hightailing it south. Mountains, ruins (shown are the Ruthven Barracks), small towns, the odd castle, and plenty of farmland scrolled by. We were too tired to care.

The pure-white Blair Castle was different enough to get us to stop. It was too late in the day to go inside, so we had to hunt around a bit to find a clear view of it through the trees.



Late in the day we pulled into Edinburgh. As usual we didn't have good enough maps and got nice tour of the town before stumbling onto the correct road. The hotel was right by the college, so the selection of nearby restaurants was a little disappointing (it was mostly budget food). After dinner we strolled into the city center. Edinburgh Castle was still lit by twilight, but the streetlights were rapidly taking over. This being Saturday night, the town was filled with young partygoers trying to find their way to the various pubs, strip clubs, and movie theaters. We retreated back to the hotel.



SUNDAY JUNE 1 2003

EDINBURGH TO CALIFORNIA

The morning was uneventful as we drove to Glasgow, returned the rental car, and checked in for our flight to London. My spirits rose as the newspaper told of eclipse successes in Durness, but sank back as I was reminded of my defeat by fog.

The flight to London was nice, we had views of the countryside between the clouds.



don we got a wonderful treat: we flew right past the center of the city. I could see the Thames, Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, the Millennium Wheel, and all the other highlights of the city.

I changed planes, now I would be flying in a 747 again. We took off, and I did some mental calculations and kept checking my watch. I knew we would fly over Greenland;

despite many trips to Europe I had never seen it, due to sleep, nighttime, or overzealous flight attendants (SIR!!! PLEASE CLOSE YOUR WINDOW!!!). This time would be different. I could see Greenland's mountains, glaciers, and icebergs. It looked like a different world. Mr. Snotty Flight Attendant was asking me to keep the window





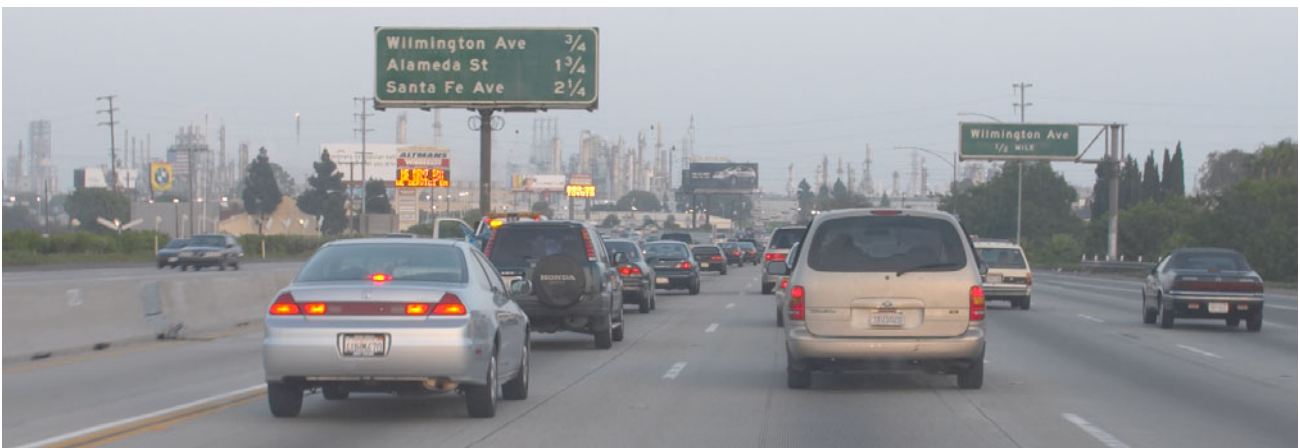
shut so people could see the movie. I decided to ignore him and enjoy my view, which was glorious!

After an eternity and a half we landed in Los Angeles. I got in my car and started driving home. Reflecting on the trip, it felt very satisfying



despite the fog on eclipse day. I would do it over again. Due to jetlag it felt like about 3 or 4 in the morning, and the depressing LA skyline and traffic jams (on a Sunday evening!)

didn't make me feel any better. I managed to get home, drop into bed, and started dreaming about my next eclipse chase: Antarctica, in November 2003.



MAP OF ROUTE WE TOOK

