

"Trick or Treat" at Shark Valley

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Nov. 1, 2009

Halloween night on Shark valley sounded a little hilarious and adventurous. Who tricked or treated whom, alligators to us?, chocolates or bites? Along US 41 toward west to Shark Valley, you could see the sun was falling into the horizon through the cloud, like a half cooked egg yolk, golden, warm and soft, what a great weather for Halloween night, Oct. 31, 2009, a full moon Saturday! Looked like that we wouldn't step on an alligator due to poor visibility.

Apparently, as was related to me later, Greg, one of the fearless leaders of the trip, decided he wanted to rollerblade around the loop, but the park rangers had caught him at his car with the blades and told him he could not use them. This was unexpected. Being a nice guy, Greg had loaned his two bikes to Tara and Melanie, so he was without bike wheels. Walking or running with mosquitoes in the humid Everglades was not fun. In addition, it would be tough to follow a group of bikers on foot. Giving up the trip and going home would be too sad. Greg then decided to take a chance to bet on the speculation that the park rangers would go home and not be there at night. He waited until the rangers had departed and started the journey with his only option that is acceptable emotionally and physically, the rollerblades.

In the meantime, the rest of us, having parked our cars safely, milled around in the parking lot waiting for Tara to arrive only to see ominous clouds gathering over the Everglades. It had been a glorious day with no forecast of rain so we thought it might just be the night drawing in that gave them a menacing demeanor. One of our group parked his bike on the sidewalk close to the entrance to the trail and others put down their back packs and a water bottle close by. Lo and behold, a medium-sized alligator appeared, slunk up the bank and crawled towards the bags and the bike. The effect on us was quite humorous as we pondered the situation: the gator looked as if it was poised to attack the bags and bike. More likely, the gator was coming for the heat on the sidewalk concrete surface to warm its cold blood instead of being hungry. With great stealth, Matt worked his way towards it very slowly and managed to tug the bike out of harm's way. Then Greg managed to retrieve the backpacks and the water bottle demonstrating a similar prowess of stealth and the situation abated without an unfortunate incident. We had never heard of an alligator attacking bags before, but then who knows - it was Halloween after all, trick or treat!

Eventually, the eleven of us set off down the trail. The mosquitoes and insects were out in full force. They were bombarding our faces, flying into open mouths and even into people's eyes. Much to her chagrin, Tara, a vegetarian, was

eating live winged protein. My glasses provided some protection from the onslaught. Fireflies were flashing on and off as they flew around us or as they settled in the vegetation. About a couple of miles along the track, the ominous clouds fulfilled their promise and it started to rain, very lightly at first, but it was too late to turn back so we pushed on. Then the rain came down harder, it was difficult to see through my glasses with rain drops trickling down them, but at least the insects stopped bothering us. The rain even penetrated the holes in my helmet wetting my hair. Everything got soaked. "Anyone brought shampoo?", asked Greg. Thankfully, the rain eased off and the full moon started to shine through the thinning clouds. By the time we reached the tower, we were more or less dried off to a more comfortable state of dampness instead of dripping wet.

At the tower, all eyes were trained on Greg's flashing red light as he flew up the ramp on his blades, at the same time gallantly carrying my heavy bike basket that was filled with goodies, flash light, bike tools and other stuff. The rest of the party followed on foot at a much slower pace. Once at the top, a couple of people took some time-delayed photos of the valiant group; we ate our snacks and people helped me lighten the load of my basket by consuming apples, bananas and cheese. Satiated, we trooped down to our bikes; this time I carried my unloaded basket as Greg had no brakes on his blades and he needed both hands to grab onto something in case he needed to slow down. He shot down the ramp and as he sped by us I yelled out "Watch out for Speedo"!

Off we set again. A couple of miles further on, someone spotted an alligator right at the side of the road. We were warned to be careful as it was probably feeling very grumpy having been blinded by the flashlight of a camera. Apparently, alligators have very sensitive eyes and it takes a considerable time for them to regain their night vision. One of our party, I don't remember who, used to work for Miami-Dade County taking kids on nature walks so he was knowledgeable about such things. A bit further on, Tara thought she had run over a snake. We all gathered around shining our lights on this poor snake lying in the road. We were peering at it looking for signs of life and inspecting it to see if it had been injured. Greg said, "Oh, don't worry, it is very hard to actually kill a snake," but I didn't think that was said on any reliable authority. Much to our relief, the snake slithered off sideways and disappeared back into the swamp.

A few miles further on, Greg decided to ride alongside me since I was trailing near the end of the team. He said, "You are doing great, much better than the first half of the trip." Immediately after he had uttered those words (perhaps it's because I find it hard to take compliments) I wobbled and lost my balance. Over I went, of course taking him with me. Some kind soul offered to lift my bike off me. My elbow was slightly scratched and so was Greg's jaw. We nursed our wounds and applied Bactine (yes, that was among the "other stuff" in my basket). Having decided no one was seriously hurt, we continued on our way.

A mile or so more down the trail, I saw vehicle lights winding along the road toward us, up and down, bright and dim, a bad sign. "I think that's a ranger's vehicle.", I said. The intelligence that the rangers would go home after the park being closed appeared to be wrong. Even CIA could mistaken the information on Iraq war, whom we could blame? It was just bad luck.

Sure enough, within a short time it stopped by the first members of our group. Greg said, "I had better hide behind you." I said, "Well, you had better turn off your flashing light." With a little panic, he couldn't. Then the truck moved towards us and stopped a little past us. A voice from the truck said, "We want to talk to you." I thought he meant me, then he said, "No, you", addressing Greg. He asked Greg for his ID. Greg rummaged through his back pack but could not find it. It was actually right in his shorts pocket, nervous? By then, everyone had come back to see what was going on. The rangers said to Greg, "You'll come back with us and we'll leave you at your car. The others can catch up to you there." As the organizer of this Shark Valley adventure, Tara insisted that someone should go with Greg in case something would happen, a very good idea. Obviously, Tara was lightening the part of her brain as a neuroscientist to be calm and thoughtful. Matt asked he if could put his bike in the back of their truck and go with them too. The rangers agreed and the four departed in the opposite direction. Matt was clearly the best person for this accompany since he works for US Army human right program.

Greg and Matt squeezed into the truck back seat from two different sides of the truck. The back seat was partitioned and Greg and Matt could not contact each other. The first thing inside the truck that no one would miss was two machine guns. That was the authoritativeness! These rangers dressed the uniform in brown color and nobody expect they were police with weapons! The back seat was piled up with bags. The seat space was so small that the bags kept falling on Greg's shoulder. He had to hold the bags while sitting there to make them stable.

It was silent inside the truck. The air seemed frozen. The two high beams of the truck looked like two bright swords cutting through the darkness of the Shark Valley. The sound of silence was the noise of the truck. Greg was wondering what they would do to him, questioning in an office?, fine?. "Are we heading north", asked Matt. "Yes", one of the rangers answered. The conversation broke the silence, the intense air seemed a little relaxed. "What did you guys see tonight, saw any alligators?" asked one of the rangers in a friendly tone. The conversation was continuing, the atmosphere inside the truck was thawing. The truck was dashing through the road our group had just passed. Greg was amazed how far the distance we had travelled since it seemed taking the truck forever to reach the ranger's office at the entrance of the park.

Greg was thinking to apologize to the two rangers once they arrive at their office in order to obtain a lighter punishment. Instead of stopping in front of an office,

the truck stopped at the park gate. Greg and Matt were asked to get off the truck. With no hesitation before departing the truck, Greg apologized to the two officers and promised no next time. The two rangers discussed a little bit among themselves and decided to only issue a written warning, two great gentlemen! They said that they hoped we would spread the words that no rollerblades would be allowed in the park. The regular punishment could have had a \$500 fine and mandatory court date, a fairly steep price to roller skate in Shark Valley! . "Thank you so much", said Greg in an excited, surprised and relieved voice.

In a few minutes, the rest of us finished riding the trail and caught up with Greg by the cars. When we saw Greg was still alive without being waterboarded, even with a smile on his face, we all cheered with a great joy to celebrate the lucky and adventurous ending. Liz hang the written warning along Greg's face side and Tara took the "The Wanted" photo.

"This is the trick or treat of the Halloween night", said Melanie.