

November 28, 2005 - Florida Everglades

Today we took a tour of the Florida Everglades. A tour van picked us up from the hotel at 9:00 AM, and drove us to a park entrance southwest of Miami. There, we took an airboat out into the Everglades where the tour guide showed us the local wildlife and explained the ecology and climate of this area. The Everglades is not a swamp, it is a very large river that flows south at less than 5 miles per day with its source being Lake Okeechobee. It is therefore a slow-moving river, and its sheer size makes it the biggest river in terms of surface area in the US. The river itself is very shallow, with average depths in the 1 – 2 feet range. We saw birds, fish, and alligators during the airboat tour. An airboat, for those who have never ridden on one, is a wide, shallow boat that sits on top of the water and not in it. Instead of a propeller, it has a big fan at the back that is used to push the boat forwards. Outside of canoes and kayaks, airboats are the only type of watercraft that can navigate the Everglades due to the shallow water.

Figure 1: Newton stands by the dock in the gator park



Figure 2: Going thru a channel in the swamp



Figure 3: Notice the back of the alligator in the water



Back at the park entrance, another tour guide showed us local wildlife up close, including a live demonstration of alligator wrestling. We thought the latter would include a lot of jaw snapping, yelling, rolling in the sand, and dodging of teeth and tail. No, there was none of that. The 11-foot long gator seemed quite docile, like it was stoned or drunk. First the tour guide tapped the gator on his snout, at which point it opened its mouth and hissed. The tour guide then walked around and over the gator such that he was straddling its back. He then used his hands to clamp its jaws shut. Next, he pushed the jaw up under his chin, and held it shut between his chin and chest. He then reached into his pocket, pulled out a bandana, and wrapped it around the gator's eyes. At this point the creature fell asleep and the park ranger claimed victory. According to the tour guide, the four tricks to doing this are:

1. The gator's jaws snap shut with incredible force, but the muscles opening the jaws are quite weak; weak enough for a human male to hold it shut with 1 (and only one!) hand.
2. Once you cover the eyes of a gator, it goes to sleep.
3. Never come from behind because a gator can whip his tail fast enough to break a man's legs in two.
4. Never attempt to wrestle a crocodile because a croc has an extra vertebra on its neck that allows it to turn its head 180 degrees around and bite anything or anyone on its back. Gators can only turn their neck 90 degrees.

Figure 4: The park ranger demonstrates the joy of gator wrestling



At the end of the show, audience members could tip the park ranger, and he would then place a baby crocodile in your arms and take your picture with it. Everyone wanted to do this, so a line quickly formed for it. Newton told Casy that we should wait for everyone else to go first, then we take our picture with the crocodile last. In this way, we can take our time to pose properly and have several pictures taken, whereas those in the front of the line have to take their pictures quickly because of the line of people behind them. Unfortunately, by the time we got to the crocodile, it was getting quite uncomfortable with people holding it, and it clawed on Casy's shoulders and arms as Casy held it. We did get a picture though.

Figure 5: Holding the baby crocodile



The tour bus got us back to our hotel at 2:30 PM. We rested a bit at the hotel, and then drove to Coral Gables, which is a wealthy part of town. The highlight of this neighborhood is the Biltmore Hotel, a very impressive building that is on the National Registry of Landmarks. We wandered around inside and outside taking pictures. Afterwards we drove into town and parked on the Miracle Mile. This 1-mile stretch of road contains a lot of nice shops and restaurants. We had dinner at an Italian restaurant, and then went home for the night.