

Have A Nice Day

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Attending ATS 2000 proved to be an adventure beyond my imagination. Traveling alone across country to a small town in the middle of the desert was a little out of character for me. I get around ok, but this trip made me realize that I need to get out more! Sometimes it's very easy to fall into a routine, and then take it for granted. Most of my personal business at home takes place within one hour of driving time. I know every stone in the road. I do what it takes to survive, and try to avoid large predators. It was a refreshing change to get away (far away), venture out and do some incredible things, all with the very nicest of people. I learned a lot, and a few memories linger in my mind that I'd like to share with you all.

My trip down to Carlsbad, New Mexico from Syracuse, New York was pretty routine. The typical flight schedule with the usual anxieties came to a welcome end in the city of El Paso, Texas. I grabbed my rented car as quickly as possible and headed northeast into the desert. I was prepared for at least a three hour drive to Carlsbad, and I knew there wasn't anything in between but wilderness. I bear witness to this fact, having already seen the countryside from above as I peered out of the window of the Boeing Super 80 descending into El Paso. One long look to the eastern horizon at 30 thousand feet confirmed that there was about 150 miles of desert flatland, split in two by the foothills of the Guadalupe Mountains. Totally foreign and beautiful landscape to me. I was in awe. Sorry if I sound like a damned tourist, but hey, if the shoe fits, no problem.

The car trip was the last leg of my journey and for the most part it was smooth sailing. I was heading east about

50 miles outside of El Paso, cruising at 70 mph parallel to the Mexican border, when I noticed way off in the distance, of all things, a stop sign! I had to blink a few times to make sure my eyes were not playing tricks on me. Visibility was at least 20 miles. It was 97°F, with no humidity. The climate felt great to me, a relief, actually and my head was clear despite traveling all day. I slowed down then came to a controlled stop. A police car was parked adjacent to a small shelter, from which a very large, heavily armed officer emerged. He paused for a moment, taking in the scene before him and he put on his hat as he approached my car. I was smiling and shaking my head, trying to figure out which button on the arm rest worked the electric window. I located it just in time, rolling the window down as he arrived. "Are you a US citizen?," he asked. "Yes, sir," I replied. I then explained my destination and he nodded, telling me to have a nice day. As he walked away my curiosity overcame me and I called him back. He gave me a puzzled look. I was wondering what he was doing out there in the middle of nowhere, stopping cars. "It's a border check," the officer said. "Ah, yes," I answered, looking to my right and seeing Mexico off in the distance. He gave me a smile and a wave as I proceeded onward. Now, you have to give the guy credit for being in a decent mood, sitting out there all day then having to be interrogated by an Easterner. There was virtually no traffic, and the next car/human combination I saw had to be 25 minutes later. I felt very much alone out there, but strangely at ease.

Driving past the Guadalupe Mountain foothills was a real treat. The rocky cliffs and rugged terrain materialize suddenly,

producing an ever changing backdrop upon which to feast your eyes. I stopped several times to take some photos. This provided a refreshing break from the long, virtually flat desert. I'm fascinated by the southwestern landscape mainly because it is so different than my home state of New York. At home in the summer it is almost always humid, hazy, damp, and very lush green with forest, rolling hills, streams, thousands of lakes, and sprawling populated areas that overlap with cities, town, suburbs, and agricultural areas. I'm also used to a complex system of state highways, roads, and interstates that offer the traveler an almost unlimited choice of routes to go from one place to another. In contrast, there is one way to get from El Paso to Carlsbad (two ways really, but the other is a lot longer). One state road. A two lane job. You can't get lost. Just drive from point a to b and that is that. Along the way, this tenderfoot from New York was totally taken by the view. There's nothing in the desert to compare with home. It's all different in the Southwest, carrying a distinct beauty of its own. The colors are earth tones. The vegetation is hard and thorny. The sun is intense, and the lack of humidity feels like good therapy. There's no water in sight, so you had better bring your own supply for the journey. There is virtually no haze, and you can see for very long distances.

As I approached the outskirts of Carlsbad, approximately 15 miles from town I saw my first wild tarantula. Again, I was cruising at highway speed and the clear visibility allowed me to spot a tarantula crossing the road less than an eighth of a mile ahead. I passed right over him as I slowed the vehicle down. The spider crouched in the center of the road in typical defensive fashion. The car stopped and I looked in my rear view mirror. I knew the blazing sun would remind the

tarantula of his agenda. His legs immediately opened like a mini umbrella and he continued his journey across the highway into the scrub. I ran back to find him, but I'm afraid he outsmarted me. I have no skills at all flushing wild tarantulas from their hiding places and I felt very inadequate. Little did I know this feeling would change for the better over the next few days. Darn, it would've been nice to have collected a local tarantula on my way to the ATS social at the Quality Inn, especially because it was the very first time I've ever seen a tarantula in the wild. That's right, everyone, it was my first time ever seeing a real, live, wild tarantula. I felt initiated, and the timing was rather nice. I was so excited about meeting all my internet arachnid buddies at the inn. These are all people I've known for years through the listservers, but have never met. Add all this together and believe me, my adrenaline was pumping.

I pulled into the Quality Inn and proceeded to check in. There was a small, partitioned terrarium on display at the check in area containing a few nice spiders. The hotel clerk explained to me that these were tarantulas. I said, "Ah, so that's what they look like up close." I happily accepted my room key and was ready to move in. It was about 5:30 PM. The clerk said, "Have a nice day."

It took me two minutes to unpack, throw a quick splash of cool water to the face, and head for the pub adjacent to the lobby. I pushed my way through the door and spotted an ATS T-shirt stuffed with a human in a straw hat at the far end of the bar. "Spider Bob, I presume?" as I extended my hand. "I'm Rhys!" Spider Bob's mouth uttered a cheerful "hello," but for a tenth of a second his eyes said "what's a Rhys?" I had a bottle of beer, and the next few hours of the evening rolled into a lively social. This little

gathering provided every missing face and every missing voice. Finally, some sense of relief. I felt like a parking lot attendant, filling all the empty spaces in my mind. Meeting and talking to everyone over the next few days took care of a huge need in my life, long overdue that somehow ran silent and deep. As I sit here writing this, sipping a chilled glass of bourbon, I raise it to all of you in a toast. With some luck we have to make sure that we can do this again.

I have to say a few words about Stan Schultz "Ball of fire." Rarely have I met a person with so much positive energy. He's constantly going and going, sending out tidal waves of good will. We tried in vain to wear him down, but he kept leading us into the desert, pausing only for a couple of hours one afternoon to say hello to his dear wife and do a quick load of laundry. Then, with a fresh supply of clean underwear he was back with a vengeance, leading another field trip that scoured the countryside bringing back a mother lode of over thirty tarantulas. I definitely walked away a richer man in a spiritual sense, having had the pleasure of spending some time with Stan and his lovely wife Marguerite. It is inspiring to see folks that are driven by a pure love of life and each other.

I met Richard Rink, a man who worked around the clock to bring you a great, day by day photo documentary of the ATS 2000 event on our web site. Reaching out to everyone at home, and staying involved in every way possible to make our gathering a success.

Mike troll Dame has brought in some technical skills that the ATS cannot live without. Every time I visit atshq.org, I am now reminded of the gentle giant that orchestrated it all. My hat is off to you, bro.

One memory that will never leave me is

the sight of so many ATS folks collecting their first ever tarantula. The scene kept repeating over again, and the smiles are now tattooed in my mind. Day and night, those moments kept me focused and finally, with the help of my new friend and hunting partner, Billy Norton, I gently flushed a tarantula out of her burrow, and onto my hand. There were many firsts for me on this trip, and this was a big one. I held my first tarantula, a wild female. What a rush. In that moment, nothing else mattered. I launched from that high point, and with a lot of momentum glided through the remainder of the event.

And a quick note about Billy. He rode his Harley alone all the way from his home state of Minnesota to attend. Look at the US map and understand the heart of a real life road warrior.

Rosemary Kraft enters a world that few of us can understand. A soft-spoken lady who in her actions gently contradicts everything we would assume about the world's biggest, baddest spiders. You simply must witness Rosemary's apparent infinite sensibilities in handling tarantulas. Africans, Asians, and New World giants succumb to her skilled, gentle and determined hands. I will go even further and suggest that she does not handle tarantulas. She puts them completely at ease and then with total confidence and control allows them to handle her!

One late evening, the ATS Executive Board set aside a few hours to talk about business. Mainly we wanted to find ways to improve future events, make the ATS Forum Magazine accessible via downloadable file on the internet, discussed ways to reduce those awful printing expenses, and brainstormed other issues that we can work on going forward. Please take the time to forward your comments to us regarding the ATS 2000 event. Ideas are welcome. Questions are

welcome. Let us know what's on your mind! It's always good to know what we did well, but it's more important to know what we can do better. In addition, we are always in need of written material for the Forum. Jot down some of your thoughts or experiences and share them with the world.

Spider Bob and Miep are working full time at the ATS headquarters. Long hours and countless tasks can be so easily taken for granted. Their lives are completely dedicated there. I kept trying to imagine from afar what it takes to run an organization like this. Believe me, you simply can't imagine it. You have to live it. And, oh yes, Miep accepts hugs, and she deserves plenty.

A special note of thanks to Dr. Fred Sherberger for companionship and expert help in the field, lunch at the caverns (800 feet below the surface) and some very stimulating conversation over breakfast. Congratulations on your upcoming retirement. Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy!

On one of our nightly jaunts, we happened upon a lovely female tarantula who was crawling through the darkness on the desert floor. We were not sure how far she had been walking, but after about four feet she made a bee-line for her burrow and darted in effortlessly. So, females do venture from the burrow at night. I'll bet that she knows every pebble, every stick and every landmark within several feet of her burrow entrance. I suspect that after many years of residence in the same hole, following the same paths, locating food, successfully hiding from larger predators, etc., this little trooper knows exactly what it takes to survive and will do just that.

Epilogue

I'm never good at saying farewell, but an amusing ending to this story took place at the El Paso airport, just prior to boarding. I traveled light, with two small carry on bags. One of those bags was half full with

deli containers holding you-know-whats. I had to walk through the metal detector a few times to shed pocket change, a money clip, my sunglasses case and a few other nagging items that kept setting off the alarm. Meanwhile, my bags went through the x-ray. As they went forward on the conveyor belt, a female Latino airport security employee loudly exclaimed "AAAAIIIIYYYYEEEEEEEEEE!! LOOK AT DEEES!" Ah, yes, so that's what they look like up close.

Heads turned, and some of her colleagues strolled over to peer at the screen. They looked closer at the transparent images, looked back at me, and giggled quite a lot. I asked if everything was ok. She said "Have a nice day." Her hair was standing on end and her eyes were bugging out. Afraid of a little spider, maybe?

Home.