

Christmas 2008

I took two major trips this year: to Costa Rica in February and to Southern Africa in October/November. The trip to **Costa Rica** was a nice break from our winter's gray cold and wet weather. The first week of this trip took us to a ranch on the dry Pacific coast near the Gulf of Nicoya. This was an *astronomy travel* event, where we observed the stars the whole night through at this very dark site (weather permitting), and then slept in during the late morning...at least that is what the brochures told us. As it turned out, some nights the weather was clear and we followed the plan. Other nights when the weather turned against us, we went to bed before midnight and got up at dawn to go on early morning nature walks around the property to see the birds and other exotic wildlife.



My second week in Costa Rica was spent exploring volcanoes, rainforest and cloud forest in the central region of the country. We saw volcanoes erupt – spitting out hot rocks, or poisonous clouds of sulphurous gas, and had a volcano expert along to explain it all to us. The cloud forest was a more sublime experience – spotting bats, lizards, birds, monkeys, and even an armadillo! We also managed to do a river rafting trip and soak in hot volcanic pools along the way. The food in Costa Rica is very good, and the people are so friendly. We were pretty spoiled by the time we had to return home - back to reality.

I also took a four week trip to **Southern Africa: Zambia, Botswana, South Africa & Swaziland**. The Zambia/Botswana segment was for 12 days and the South Africa/Swaziland segment took

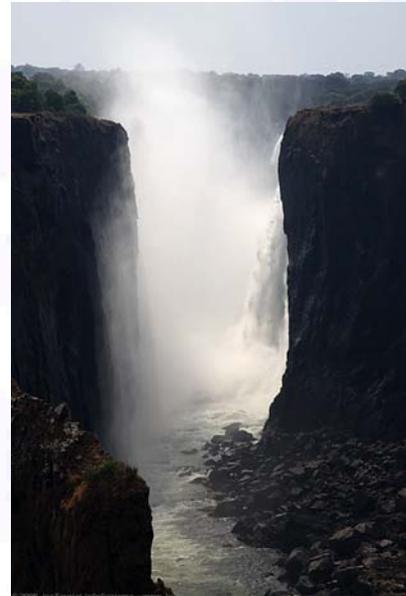


two weeks. The rest of the time was taken up with traveling to and from Africa – a 30 hour endurance contest in each direction! This certainly represents the longest consecutive flights I've taken in my travels to date, although I learned on my flights to New Zealand in 2004 and to Libya in 2006 that I can survive long flights without problem.

The main reason for the trip to Southern Africa was to experience a safari. Well, mission accomplished! I was on two safaris a day for *every* day I was in Botswana, and

we took two more safaris while in South Africa (one to the famous Kruger Park). The safaris in Botswana were certainly more “authentic”, since we were sleeping in tents in a safari camp on the Okavango Delta. The camps had no electricity or running water, and yet the camp staff did a wonderful job of keeping us happy (and healthy). Mosquitoes and flies were not a problem since I was traveling in the dry season, but temperatures were hot in Botswana – ranging from 37° to 40°C in the afternoon shade. Siesta time!

The Botswana safari segment actually started in Zambia. I flew from Johannesburg to Livingston, where I picked up my Botswana guide. First stop was Victoria Falls (photo at right) – a spectacular sight, despite there being virtually no water on the Zambian side of the falls. Not to worry – we had a great view of the Zimbabwe side of the falls, which still had lots of water. We stayed at the famous Shackelton’s Lodge on the Zambezi River overnight, which was a sublime experience. The next day we went on a cruise along the Chobe River, which is really a delta area close to the Namibia border. We saw lots of wildlife up close from the boat before we departed by Land Cruiser for Linyanti Camp on the Okavango Delta.



The highlights of the Southern Africa trip: seeing Victoria Falls (an *I was there moment*); watching Wild Dogs and their pups rest after devouring a fresh kill; being so close to Lions we could hear them panting; observing stars in the dark African skies with the nearest source of light pollution over 1,000 kilometers away; watching a herd of Elephants wander by my tent at sunrise, only metres away; body surfing in the warm Indian Ocean on the Wild Coast of South Africa; standing on the point at the Cape of Good Hope (certainly another *I was there moment*).

I’m still working on putting my photos, video, and travelogue online for the Southern Africa trip; however the Costa Rica trip is posted to my [JoeTourist website](#).



Kirk and I have talked about purchasing a motor home several times over the last couple of years. In late August we finally decided to go for it, and purchased a 27’ Forest River Lexington. It has all the bells and whistles, including the fancy paint job outside. We’ve taken it on a couple of trips already and we also enjoy day trips to the local parks and beaches. We plan to explore Vancouver Island the first year, and then venture further afield after that. It’s a pleasure to be able to take the pets with us, and be self-sufficient.

My mother continues to be as happy as a clam at Aberdeen Hospital. The operator of the facility has plans to take in short term convalescent patients (post orthopedic surgery patients mainly), which will cause some disruption with the extended care patients such as my Mum. They have promised to make change gradually and consult with the families often, so I'm fairly confident the arrangements I made for Mum a couple of years ago can be maintained for her into the future.

This was a year for Joe to acquire new technology. A new high definition video camera, the Canon HV-20 was my first acquisition. I wanted to try my hand at shooting video while on safari, so I purchased this videocam several months in advance of my departure so I would have time to practice. Shooting video certainly requires a new skill set as compared with shooting still photos. Keeping the videocam still and level is no mean feat, and sound quality is an issue I have to work on.

Just a week before I left on my African safari, I decided to upgrade my trusty Canon 30D digital SLR camera to the just-released 50D. The two cameras share much of the same feature set, so I wasn't too concerned about taking the new camera on the trip. The 50D worked out beautifully, and allowed me a bit more flexibility with my photography. I took along my Dell XPS notebook computer on the safari, which really helped with cataloguing the photos as I took them. It also allowed me to connect to wireless networks as I travelled through South Africa, which meant I could keep in touch with everyone at home, and post entries to my [JoeTourist blog](#).



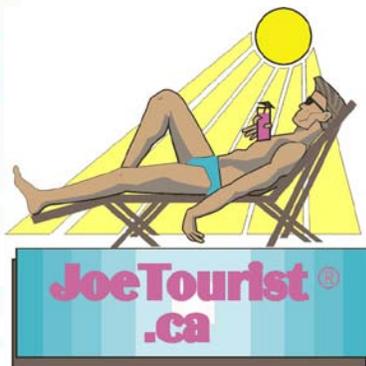
My astronomical observing program has been hit-and-miss this year. I try to blame the weather, but really the problem is personal motivation. I did very well in February and during the summer months, producing quite a few very nice photos (including the Lunar Eclipse composite photo to the right). I completely changed my telescope setup this year, selling my trusty Meade LX200 8" and purchasing a Borg 101ED Astrograph. The Meade telescope was just too heavy for me to lift and maneuver into the vehicle, so I decided to downsize to the Borg and a mid-sized equatorial mount (HEQ5).

This new combination still gives me "go-to" capability, but also gives me the advantage of lighter gear. It is also better suited to my interest in using my telescopes for photographing the night sky. The Borg Astrograph is much easier to use for photography, and it allows me to be much more productive on any given night. Although I've had limited use of the new gear, I know it

will fit my needs into the future. I'm also looking forward to using our new motor home to attend star parties in 2009 (and beyond)!

As usual, Kirk started decorating inside for Christmas in October, and old grumpy (me) reluctantly put up the outside Christmas lights in mid-November. This is the earliest I've put the outside lights up, but being retired, I really had no excuse when the weather cleared. We went to all LED lights this year.

I have found that my first full year of retirement is working well for me, as well as my family. Despite spending more time at home, we don't seem to be having problems adjusting to new routines, and no turf wars seem to have broken out! I am certainly spending more time on the computer, but hopefully it is productive time spent improving my own (and others') websites. I'm also taking time to learn how to more fully use the computer software I have already acquired. I can more thoroughly plan my travel, and I can dedicate myself to preparing for an upcoming trip, so hopefully I am getting more out of my travel now versus when I was still employed.



My horizons and interests are broadening, especially when it comes to making better use of online services. I'm now actively using: [Zenfolio](#) to host my astronomical photography and I'm using [flickr](#) to host my other photographs; [vimeo](#) to host my high definition videos; [Microsoft TechNet](#) to keep up with the latest and greatest software released by Microsoft; and [ConsumerReports.org](#) which offers a great resource to ensure I'm a smart consumer. [Geocaching](#) is a pastime I don't have much time for, but I'm interested in; and I'm just trying out [facebook](#) to keep in touch with my friends (my relatives seem to be conspicuously absent in an online sense). As mentioned above, I'm using my [JoeTourist blog](#) to post travelogue entries and some photos while I'm traveling. Of course, I've hosted and run my own websites as part of my [JoeTourist InfoSystems](#) business, including my [JoeTourist.ca](#) travelogue website, my [JoeTourist weather station](#) website, and my [JoeCarr.ca](#) personal website. So as you can see, I'm online in a big way!

All the best to you and yours for the upcoming holidays, and we hope 2009 brings you much joy and happiness...

*Joe & Kirk,
Sheba and Tucker*