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A Journey across the Ordos

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Dr. CHARCOT: I simply want to tell you how very much touched I am by what has been said. When men that I admire like Sir Ernest Shackleton, Sir Lewis Beaumont, Dr. Mill, and Mr. Bernacchi have said the things that they have said this evening, it is really the greatest reward that an explorer may have for all the work he has tried to do. I do not merit it, but I thank you all the same with all my heart for having said all those nice things now that I have come back, and not before I left, for certainly the *Pourquoi Pas?* would not have been big enough to hold me!

A JOURNEY ACROSS THE ORDOS.*

By Major GEORGE PEREIRA.

WITH a view to proceeding overland to Burma, I left Peking on June 3, 1910, taking the Chinese constructed railway which runs north-west to Kalgan, a distance of 123 miles. There I engaged three carts to Kuei-hua-ch'eng, 207½ miles distant. This country is bare and treeless, sparsely inhabited by Chinese, who, during the last forty years, have been gradually buying up the land, pushing the Mongols slowly but relentlessly further north. Wheat, beans, and oats are the chief crops. Dust-storms, coming from the west, were very prevalent. In Northern Shan-si they talk a very pronounced dialect, more difficult for a Pekingese to understand than any other part of North China. I came across several of the Belgian missionaries, the only foreigners I met with all the way to Ning-hsia Fu, with the exception of Mr. Oberg of the Swedish Mission at Sa-la-ch'i, and a party who were visiting him.

The Chih-li Shan-si boundary runs through the town of Hsi-ying-tzu: most maps show it too far east. Shan-si Province has recently been extended westwards and now takes in the valley of the Huang Ho (north of the Ordos) nearly up to the town of Tung-wang-yeh-fu (not a prefectural Fu), marked on maps as A-shan, a name unknown to the Chinese, and where it now joins on to Kan-su. Kuei-hua-ch'eng, officially called Kuei-hua T'ing, has from 70,000 to 80,000 inhabitants, and is probably the most densely populated city of Shan-si, Ta-t'ung Fu coming next. The walled Manchu town of Sui-yüan-ch'eng is 1½ mile to the north-east of Kuei-hua-ch'eng.

Here I engaged three Peking carts, each with two good mules, for the journey across the Ordos to Ning-hsia, a distance of 403½ miles, and which took us twenty days. The charge for each cart was only 40 local taels, about £5 6s. 8d. I purchased a native tent for the desert journey.

Leaving Kuei-hua on June 15, I proceeded westerly across a wide fertile plain, bounded a few miles to the north by a great rugged range, called the Ta-ch'ing Shan, and stretching away south to the Yellow river (Huang Ho). Chinese emigrants are constantly arriving, some only

* Map, p. 348.

staying for the season to work in the fields, attracted by higher wages. Wheat, millet, barley, beans, and sesame are the chief crops.

The chief towns are P'i-hsieh-ch'i, with some 1500 houses, Sa-la-ch'i T'ing, and Pao-t'ou-chen. Sa-la-ch'i T'ing, also known by its Mongol name of K'u-lun-erh, is 78 miles west of Kuei-hua-ch'eng, and is wrongly marked on all maps I have seen. It has about 8000 inhabitants.

Pao-t'ou-chen, exactly 100 miles from Kuei-hua, is the principal city of the district, with a population of probably about 15,000 to 20,000 people. It is a great centre for the wool trade and also for coal, which comes from the hills about 18 miles to the north. It has a large supply of carts, but very few go annually to Kan-su Province, owing to the difficulties of the journey. In the winter they follow along the north bank of the Yellow river, and then go south by San-tao-ho to Ning-hsia Fu, taking from eighteen to twenty days on the journey; but in summer this route is not practicable, owing to floods, and they prefer to cross the Ordos. As no supplies can be obtained in that desolate region, it is necessary to carry food and forage for nine days. Travellers usually prefer to go by boat up the Yellow river, a laborious journey which takes nearly a month, as boats have to be towed by four or five men all the way.

For the Ordos journey camels, though slow, would be preferable to carts, as they can go anywhere, whilst I would advise anybody using carts to have three mules (instead of two) to each cart. One of my carters had previously once made the journey across the Ordos, and I was surprised to find how, with so few people to direct us when once in that country, he was able to find the way. He also claimed to have a mastery of the Mongol language, but in this respect, as might be expected, he proved to be an utter fraud. Another of my carters was a hopeless opium sot, and spent most of the days asleep on his perch, varied only by bouts of walking exercise, in which I made him unwillingly indulge.

Leaving Pao-t'ou with my two boys and the three carters on June 20, we crossed the Yellow river by ferry, near Lan-kuei-yao-tzu, about 24 miles west-south-west of Pao-t'ou, and proceeded westerly along a narrow strip of sandy soil between the Yellow river and the Ordos sandhills, sparsely inhabited by Chinese, till we reached the limits of civilization at Te-sheng-heng. Here there is an inn and a fort of ten or eleven Chinese soldiers. Just after crossing the ferry, I was kicked by one of my mules and the cart-wheel ran over my leg. Fortunately, in the absence of any sort of doctor, no bones were broken, the journey was not interrupted, and after two days of confinement to the cart, I was again able to walk.

On June 23 I left Te-sheng-heng, the local guard turning out, some saluting and others not, "more sinico," and after a mile I reached a sandy ridge, 100 to 200 feet high, running roughly parallel to the Yellow river, and forming the northern boundary of the Ordos.

The part of the Ordos I crossed, a distance of 172½ miles to Shih-tsui-tzu, may be divided into four sections, viz.—

First section (47 miles), to the Da-ba-sun Nor (lake) is a dreary waste of sand, broken up by sandhills, mostly thinly covered with scrub, 1 or 2 feet high, with an occasional bush 3 feet high. Here we met an occasional Chinese coolie, returning home after working for the local Mongol prince, and at the wells we usually found two or three flocks, tended by a few Mongols. The going was very bad, and our rate of progress was usually under 2 miles an hour.

Second Section (37 miles), to Shih-li-nor-rai is the most pleasant part. I saw nearly a dozen small Mongol lamaseries, a fair number of sheep, goats, bullocks, camels, donkeys and ponies grazing with two or three Mongols in charge of each flock, the country more open, and the going much better. The same low scrub. A conspicuous ridge, 300 to 400 feet high, runs north-west through this section.

Third Section (59 miles), to 9 miles south-west of the San-yen-ching (well). There is a gradual rise over a succession of interminable small ridges with a final descent to a plain. There are only two wells. We did not see a single mongol hut or flock, or meet anybody on the road. It is a desolate waste of dry grass and weeds, with dwarf scrub 2 or 3 inches high.

Fourth section (29½ miles to the Yellow river), there is a gradual descent. I saw two lamaseries and an occasional Chinese merchant or coolie going into the country.

Altogether the part of the Ordos that I crossed is a dreary desolate country without a patch of cultivation, and I did not see a single tree till I reached the banks of the Yellow river. Rarely, except when entering or leaving the country, did we meet a soul on the road. The country is entirely dependent on the wells, some of which are revetted with sticks, whilst others are protected with stones, and these form little centres, near which the Mongols gather with their flocks. It appears to be very thinly inhabited, and I do not think I saw 100 Mongols in the whole journey. Sometimes two or three of their circular huts, made of sticks covered with felt, about 12 feet in diameter, and 9 to 12 feet high, are found near a well, but for the last 88 miles I did not meet a single Mongol, until I came across a party of a dozen, acting as ferrymen on the Yellow river. I also saw about 20 or 30 Chinese, chiefly coolies, trekking across the country for work.

In all the surrounding country, and I believe even in the eastern part of the Ordos, Chinese emigrants are pushing forward and ousting the Mongols, but in these parts the absence of water, and the altitude which precludes all possibilities of irrigation, makes the country of no value, except for a little grazing, and even Chinese doggedness has not ventured to push in.

There are no buildings excepting one ya-men on the lake and about a dozen small lamaseries. Of the latter the biggest I saw was the Hou-ching-chao, a brick building about 28 feet square, surmounted by a Chinese



CART STUCK IN ROAD, EAST OF SA-LA-CHI-LI.



CAVE DWELLINGS IN LOESS, KUEI-HUA.

roof, with two smaller temples at the side, and about a dozen mud huts for the attendants, said to be about thirty or forty in number.

Except where sand has obliterated the traces, I usually found cart tracks, though we only saw three small bullock-carts belonging to a lamasery. Wild flowers of many varieties are found. Lizards are the chief product of animal life, whilst small brown rats are numerous. Deer are plentiful in parts, especially in the third section, where in one valley, 9 miles from Shih-li-nor-rai, I saw about 400, but at other times I never saw more than about thirty at one time. Hares are fairly plentiful, and there are a few partridges, sand-grouse, wild pigeons, and cranes, exclusive of hawks and small birds.

The Da-ba-sun lake, called by the Chinese Ta-yeh-hai-tzu, is marked too far north and shown too large on maps, which call it the Chara-mannai Nor, but the local Mongols had never heard of this name, or anything like it. It is about 8 miles long from north-east to south-west, and from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 miles wide. There are of course no boats on it. There was water in the western part, whilst the eastern portion was a morass, covered with salt, like a thin coating of ice. After crossing over about 1000 yards of the dried-up part, the ground gradually became softer, and I was unable to proceed. A local Mongol told me that after rains it is sometimes over 6 feet deep in places. The salt forms part of the revenue of the local Mongol prince Hangin (in Chinese Huang-kai), who is stated to live some 9 miles further south. Excepting for the wells, I only found fresh water in two small streams (one at Mou-pa-la, and the other flowing for a short way to the lake), but even these soon ran into the sand. The rest of the stream-beds were dry, and most had traces of salt.

With a total absence of any protection from the sun, the weather was generally hot by day and chilly at night; once at 1 p.m. my thermometer registered 90° Fahrenheit, whilst at 5 a.m. the following morning, with a north wind, it was 41°. Fortunately we only had two slight showers and one most unpleasant sandstorm.

The word Ordos is unknown to the Chinese, but is used by the Mongols. Even an intelligent Chinese postmaster at Ning-hsia Fu did not know of any name for it. Some maps call it Hou-t'ao, but this is the name of a plain north of the Yellow river, and running easterly to the north of the U-la Shan range.

Mr. Carles, in his article on the Ordos (*Geographical Journal* of June, 1909), says that the Abbé Huc passed south of the Da-ba-sun lake to Shih-tsui-tzu, so I must have followed his route for this part of the journey. I have not heard of any other Europeans who have made this journey, though I dare say that Belgian missionaries, who have a large colony at San-tao-ho on the Yellow river (west of the Ordos), and others have been over it. My altitudes were taken with an aneroid, and are therefore only useful as showing the relative heights of places with one another. Entering the Ordos, my aneroid registered 4650 feet, after which there was a gradual

rise of 1160 feet with a fall of 830 feet to the Da-ba-sun lake, then a gradual rise of 1400 feet and a drop of 1270 feet to the Yellow river at Shih-tsui-tzu, where the aneroid showed 5150 feet. The only high hills I saw was a rugged range, called by the Mongols A-ra-bus U-la (the southern part called Ch'i-p'an shan by the Chinese), which bounds the Ordos to the west.

I only found loess in the hills 40 or 50 miles from Shih-tsui-tzu and in the last 7 miles to the Yellow river.

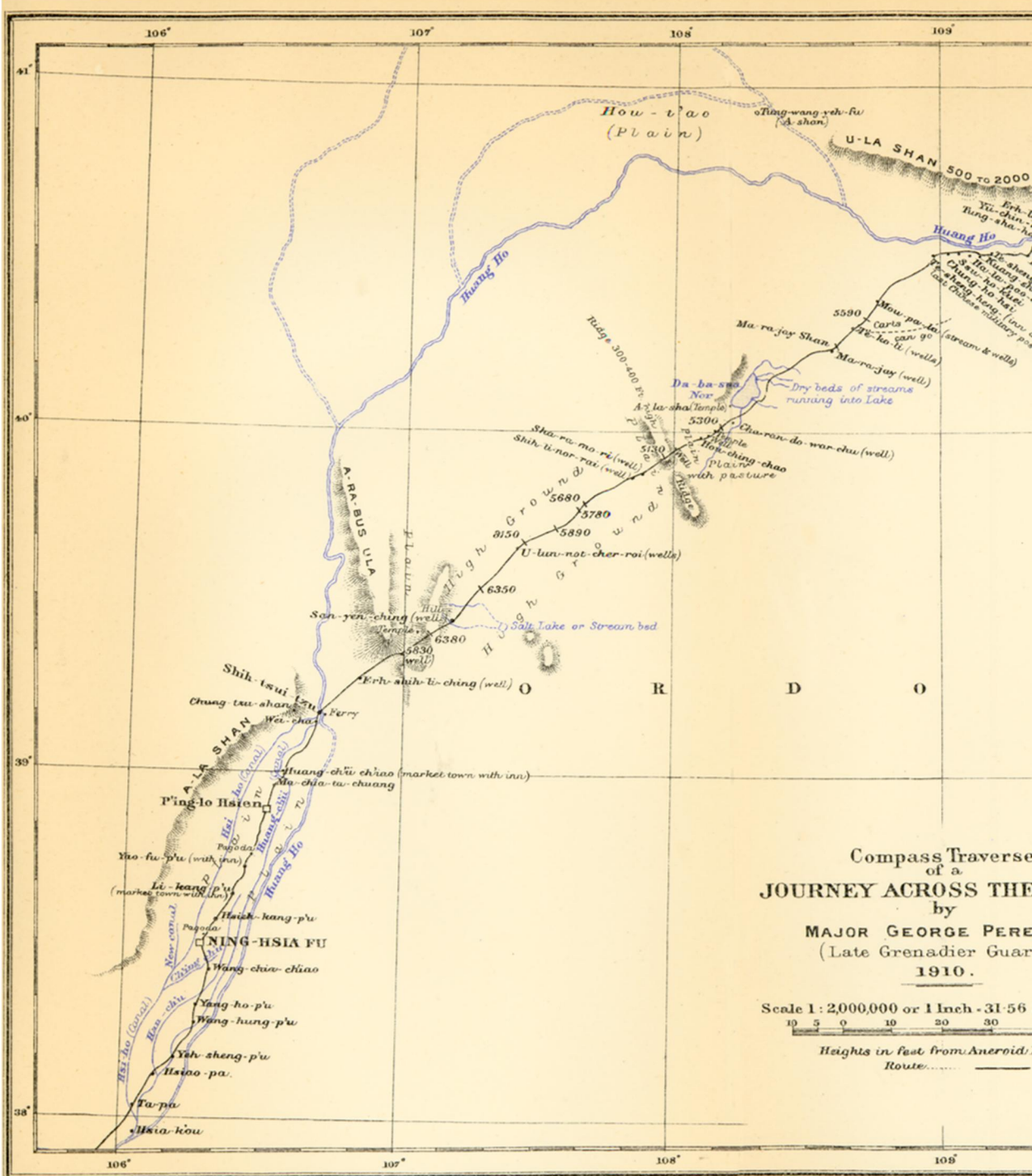
The Yellow river at both ferries is from 400 to 500 yards wide, with a strong current, and as muddy as when it passes through Ho-nan and Shan-tung. I was told that it was proposed to put a Belgian steam-launch on the river to run between Ning-hsia Fu and Ho-k'ou, the port of Kuei-hua-ch'eng, and that the parts were awaiting transportation at Ta-ku. To cross the Ordos once is a matter of interest, but I think only a Mongol, a misanthrope or a madman would care to repeat the experiment.

I again entered civilization at Shih-tsui-tzu (officially called Shih-tsui-shan), a wretched town of 700 or 800 houses in a barren sandy plain. Three or four miles further south, however, I entered a very fertile region, between the Yellow river and the rugged A-la-shan, watered by five canals, which are supplied with water from the Yellow river, and which distribute it through countless irrigation channels over the surrounding fields. Wheat, barley, rice, millet, Kao-liang, beans, linseed, and vegetables are grown. One of these canals dates from the Han dynasty (nearly 2000 years old), another from the T'ang, a third from the present Manchu, whilst a fourth has lately been made from money left by the late General Tung-fu-hsiang, the noted Boxer.

Huang-ch'ü-ch'iao is a busy market town of over 500 houses, P'ing-lo Hsien a wretched city of 400 or 500 houses, and Ning-hsai Fu, 63½ miles from Shih-tsui-tzu, is slowly recovering from the Mohammedan rebellion of forty years ago, and has probably a population of 40,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. Carpet-making is the great industry. Mr. and Mrs. Fiddler (British) and their family are the only European residents.

Whilst in Shan-si I did not see a single poppy, and the opium regulations, a missionary told me, had been obeyed with strictness. Entering Kan-su I found poppy-fields between Shih-tsui-tzu and Ning-hsia Fu. Mr. Fiddler, however, is informed that 90 per cent. less poppies are now grown than formerly in the district.

I found the people most friendly as usual, only occasionally I chanced to overhear a man pointing me out to an unobservant pal as a "foreign devil" (yang-kuei-tzu).

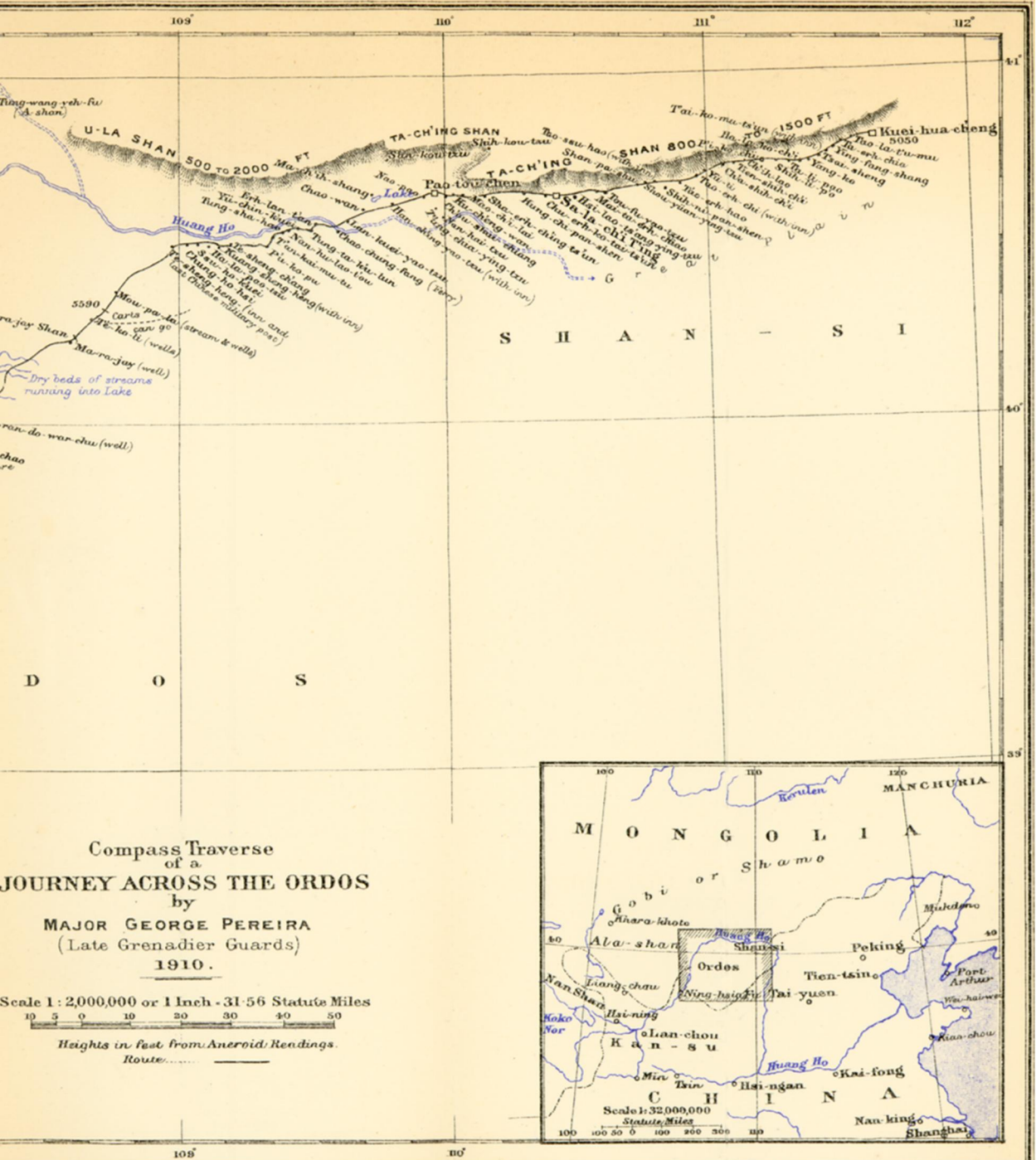


Compass Traverse
of a
JOURNEY ACROSS THE
by
MAJOR GEORGE PERE
(Late Grenadier Guard)
1910.

Scale 1: 2,000,000 or 1 Inch = 31.56

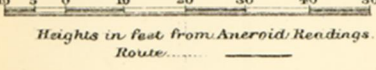
10 5 0 10 20 30
Heights in feet from Aneroid
Route.....

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Compass Traverse
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Scale 1: 2,000,000 or 1 Inch = 31.56 Statute Miles



Scale 1: 32,000,000
Statute Miles