

The Dakotas – Heart of the Northern Plains
(Part 2 – Fargo, North Dakota to the Black Hills of South Dakota)

It wasn't long before the lady from Hertz arrived with my rental car, which I would have for the next two weeks. (A deep metallic blue Mazda 626 with racing wheels and a "spoiler" – not really my style, but nonetheless comfortable inside) From Fargo I headed south, following the Red River of the North to the old site of historic Fort Abercrombie, the first US Army post built in the new Dakota Territory in 1858. A few of the old buildings and part of the wall surrounding the fort had been rebuilt, but the majority of the post was just a collection of old stone foundations.



From Fort Abercrombie, I crossed over the Red River of the North to the small town of Kent, Minnesota before returning on the Minnesota side of the river to Fargo. Along the way, I passed lots of farms in the fertile bottomland of the river valley. As I came into downtown Fargo, I spotted the historic old Northern Pacific Railroad Station – a lovely classic 19th century building that had been converted into a Senior Center, which I thought was most appropriate. As I walked around downtown, I noticed many old buildings were being restored, as well as lots of new markers detailing the history of Fargo.

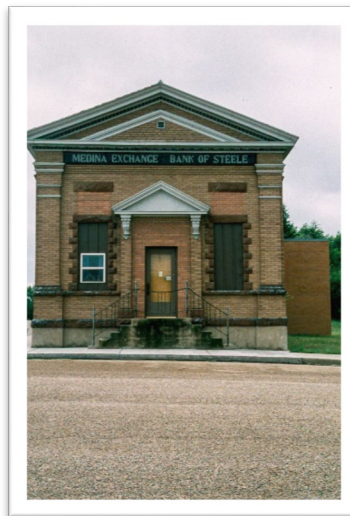


The town was named in honor of James Fargo of "Wells Fargo" fame. A small antique shop caught my eye and there I found an old Great Northern Railway passenger train timetable from the late 1940's. It was very interesting to compare it with the current Amtrak schedule on the same route! (I remembered back to the winter of 1967 when I travelled from Portland to Chicago on the original Great Northern "Empire Builder" train) From the antique shop, I walked along a path following the Red River of the North to the old Great Northern Railway Station, now home to the "Great Northern Brewery and Restaurant". (Their California Pale Ale was quite good)



By then it was approaching time for dinner, so I returned to the Holiday Inn and went next door to the “Timberline Steakhouse” for a fantastic meal of authentic French onion soup, followed by two rare filet medallion steaks and an order of coconut shrimp! It was really a delicious dinner, but far too much food. So, I took half of it back to my room to enjoy for another day.

The next morning, I woke up to find heavy rain falling outside. But after a couple of hours driving west on I-94, the rain slowly dissipated, and the sun broke through the heavy clouds as I approached Jamestown. From there, I made a brief stop in the very small wheat farming town of Medina, so typical of 95% of the towns in North Dakota. As I toured the town, the only brick building I could see was the old “Exchange Bank of Steele” – now a private residence!



But the “highlight” of my visit to Medina was a beautiful mural depicting the agricultural heritage of the region. Continuing west towards Bismarck, I crossed over the summit of the “Continental Divide”, barely a “bump in the road” at an elevation of 1305 feet above sea level. However, it divides the rivers flowing north to the Arctic ocean from those flowing south to the Gulf of Mexico. (Albeit, not as dramatic as the “other” Continental Divide separating the rivers flowing east to the Atlantic from those flowing west to the Pacific)



Late that evening, I finally reached Bismarck, the capitol of North Dakota. When I stopped at the Comfort Suites Hotel downtown, the only room they had available was the “Presidential Suite”, so I took it. (Nice 2 room suite with a jacuzzi and very quiet) For dinner that evening, I “zapped” my leftovers from the previous evening in Fargo, and they were still delicious! Later in the evening I walked downtown to the old “Chicago, Milwaukee, St Paul and Pacific Railroad Station”, known as the “Milwaukee Road”, and discovered it had been turned into a Mexican restaurant. From the outside the old station still looked much like the past, but inside it bore no resemblance to the historic past – how sad! (And they didn’t even have a decent local craft beer) But across the street was a very interesting place called “Peacock Alley”. In the past it had been an old hotel and was now a trendy new bar with a young crowd and a very diverse selection of craft beers on draft. So, I ordered a tall glass of local Great Northern IPA and soaked up the historic atmosphere of the former hotel lobby as I wrote notes in my journal. (Good music, good beer, good place!)

The next morning, I visited the State Capitol Heritage Center. The museum had excellent displays of everything from the pre-history of the region to the more recent culture of Native Americans. There was even a complete skeleton of an ancient Woolly Mammoth, in addition to many priceless relics, cultural artifacts, old farming equipment, as well as historic images of the first railroad constructed across North Dakota.



I spent over two hours exploring the museum and was totally fascinated the entire time! As part of my museum experience, I learned that a large number of immigrants had come from Norway and Germany in the early 1800’s, lured by the promise of free land. But perhaps the most interesting history, yet so tragic, was that of the Plains Indians who were forced to abandon their nomadic culture and reluctantly accept life on reservations. (Later, as I travelled across the region, I saw many signs of a revival of “pride” in their heritage. And the fact that I had watched Steven Spielberg’s monumental film “Into the

West” just before embarking on my trip really helped me appreciate the deeply held spiritual beliefs, long traditions, and cultural values of all Native Americans.)

Just a few miles west of Bismarck, I visited the historic old Fort Abraham Lincoln on the shore of the Missouri River. The fort was the last posting for Lt Colonel George Armstrong Custer before he met his fate at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. (Contrary to popular belief, he was never a General) I found the fort to be faithfully restored, even outfitted with much the same gear as soldiers would have had back in the 1870's. In one of the old wooden barracks, each bunk had a name plate that listed the soldier's name, position in Custer's regiment, and the date of his death. (Most of them had died on the same date at the Battle of the Little Big Horn)



As I walked through the restored buildings, I was amazed to see that all of the antiques and historical artifacts were openly displayed within a hand's reach. The interpretive center also had a considerable collection of history regarding the Native Americans of the region, including the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes who had befriended Lewis and Clark. The tribes originally migrated from the Great Lakes region in the east where they had been farmers, in contrast to the Sioux and Cheyenne who were nomadic hunters. I was astounded to find out that the Mandan and Hidatsa people also traded with other tribes from as far away as eastern Canada and the Pacific Northwest! Also, several miles north of the fort, the park service had reconstructed a traditional Mandan village consisting of several earthen lodges. As I walked through the village, I tried to imagine what Lewis and Clark must have experienced over 200 years ago.



South of Bismarck along the Missouri River, which had become the enormous Lake Oahe since being dammed by the Corps of Engineers, I came to the small Indian village of Fort Yates, a former US Army post established in 1863, and now the tribal headquarters for the “Standing Rock Indian Reservation”. The name of the reservation honors a huge geologic formation nearby called “Standing Rock”. According

to Sioux legend, the rock is believed to be that of a woman and her baby who were turned into stone by the Great Spirit, and for the Sioux it's a sacred monument. While I was exploring the reservation, I had a difficult time trying to find the grave of Sitting Bull, the most famous Sioux Chief. It was not well marked, even though it's a very historic site!



From the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, I turned north again on State Route 6 to Washburn along the Missouri River where I came to the new “Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center”, recently established by the National Park Service. Here I found a fascinating display of the expedition’s history, known in 1804 as the “Corps of Discovery”, charged by President Thomas Jefferson to explore the newly acquired lands of the Louisiana Purchase. The mission of the expedition was to gather as much information as possible about everything they encountered, from the cultures of native people, to the plants, animals, and geology, as well as anything else they saw. Every man on the expedition was also given the task of keeping a journal – without a doubt an “arduous” task, given their daily work of moving the expedition’s boats up a river that was totally unknown to them! It’s particularly a true credit to both Lewis and Clark that they managed to find enough time each day to write such detailed accounts, regardless of the tremendous hardships they faced each day – their journals are a remarkable national treasure!



Nearby was the historical reconstruction of Fort Mandan and the Knife River Indian Village. Once again, the history was very well interpreted and illustrated in great detail, especially with the paintings and sketches by artist George Caitlan. At Fort Mandan, a park service interpreter dressed in the clothing of the late 1700's, gave us a tour of the small fort which was originally constructed during the winter of

1804-05 by the 37 men on the expedition. It was also here that Sakakawea (the Dakota spelling for Sacajawea) gave birth to her son, fathered by the French fur trader Charbonneau.



After walking around the Knife River village site on the Missouri River, I drove northwest on narrow unpaved country roads, parallel to the route of Lewis and Clark, or at least as close as possible, given that the mighty river had been dammed in the 20th century, effectively flooding much of the area that Lewis and Clark would have seen. (Such is the loss of history in the name of progress!) As I drove along the rural roads of North Dakota, the landscape was one of massive wheat fields as far as my eyes could see, interrupted only occasionally by a small town consisting of tall grain elevators, a railroad track, and homesteads marked by a grove of trees acting as a windbreak! Travelling through this region, I passed very few vehicles, and the road was always straight and level so that I only had to make a half dozen turns of the steering wheel. To say that the land was flat and without any obstruction of the view of the horizon would be an understatement, especially as I passed through the tiny town of Zap! Yet it was a beautiful but stark landscape.



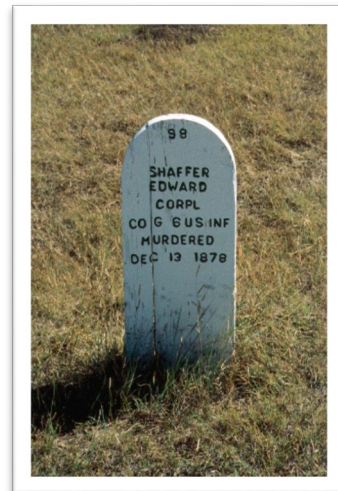
My plan had been to stay at the "4 Bears Lodge" on the Fort Berthoud Indian Reservation, but when I arrived at 6pm, I was told there were no rooms available and that the lodge had been sold out for months! When I asked the reason, I was told this weekend was the largest "Pow Wow" in all of North Dakota, South Dakota, and southern Saskatchewan! So, then I asked if they could recommend a place to stay for the night. The kindly old Indian lady behind the front desk said my best options were to drive either east to the small town of Stanley (32 miles) or west to the equally small town of Watford City (40 miles). I chose to head west and after finding the one and only motel fully booked, I had no choice but to continue driving west to the next town, Williston, 120 miles away! (I don't think there was a vacant

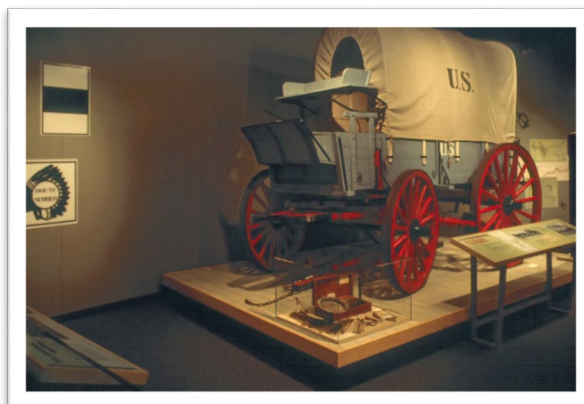
room within 100 miles of the reservation!) The sunset that evening was absolutely spectacular as I finally arrived in Williston and quickly spotted a “vacancy” sign outside the Airport International Inn.



As I checked in and asked for a quiet room, the young man behind the front desk said the US Army 188th Band was staying at the hotel, but he would put me on the other side of the hotel. Not having eaten since 9:00 am that morning, I was starving. So, I headed out to find something to eat and was lucky to see Colonel Sanders just before he closed! I ended the day in my hotel room watching CNN news and munching on fried chicken.

Early the next morning, I headed west to the Fort Buford Historic site, an important military post in the 1800's at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. The site had a great exhibit about the Lewis and Clark expedition, as well as a fascinating display on the development of several huge irrigation projects by the Bureau of Reclamation and Corps of Engineers. I spent some time exploring the reconstruction of the old fort, including the old cemetery where all the gravestones listed the cause of death – the most common being “murder”! Many of the graves were those of Custer's soldiers who died at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.



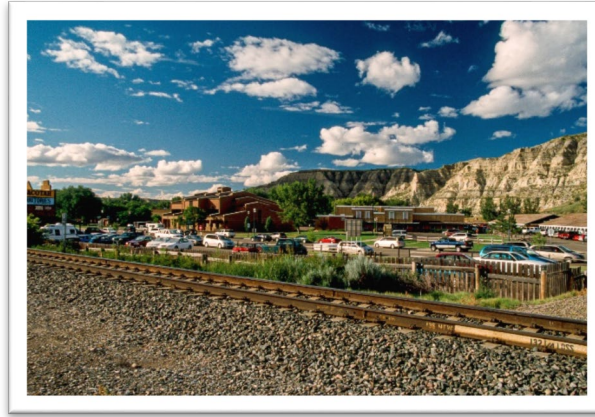


From Fort Buford I drove southwest on a narrow gravel road to the tiny town of Sidney, Montana. Here I found a lovely picnic spot under beautiful blue skies along the banks of the Yellowstone River. Leaving Sidney, I headed east, back into North Dakota, to the North Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park, one of the least visited national parks in the country. The park encompasses a huge expanse of western North Dakota known as the “badlands”, a beautiful landscape of grassland and deeply eroded hills. As I drove through the park, large herds of Buffalo grazed peacefully, and at times walked down the road in front of me! Needless to say, it was obvious they had the right-of-way. There were many opportunities for closeup photos of the Buffalo, as well as panoramic shots of the surrounding landscape.



I exited the park as sunset approached and proceeded to the small town of Medora where I found a nice room at the Americana Inn Hotel. Then it was time to find a place for dinner and I ended up at the “Iron

Horse Saloon”, upon the recommendation of the hotel front desk. The origin of the restaurant’s name came from the fact that it was originally the railway station for the Northern Pacific Railroad, now part of the BNSF railroad. I chose a table outside on the deck overlooking the railroad tracks, and ordered a delicious Buffalo burger, along with a cold pint of local Bismarck Pale Ale. While I sat on the deck, the sun slowly set in the west and a couple of long BNSF freight trains roared past on their way to Minneapolis and Chicago.



After a delicious dinner, I walked across the street to the “Little Missouri Saloon”, where the most popular beer was “Grain Belt Premium” brewed in the northern plains for over a century. When I asked if there was a local “craft” beer, the old bartender recommended “Rough Rider Pale Ale” brewed by the Dakota Brewing Company in Rapid City, South Dakota and named in honor of Teddy Roosevelt. The saloon was very lively that evening and had a very diverse crowd of local cowboys and oil field workers – tourists were in the minority. As I sat at the bar with the cold pint of Rough Rider, I noticed several very interesting aspects of the bar.

- Food Network was playing on all the TVs, but country music was the dominant sound
- A lot of the older cowboys were dancing to German polka music
- Virtually no one wearing a cowboy hat ever took it off
- An order of Scotch and soda was delivered in a children’s cup with a straw to an old man in the corner because he had “spilled” his previous drink – the whole bar burst out laughing!
- A large sign above the bar read: “checks from anywhere in the USA are welcome – we do not accept credit cards” (enough said)

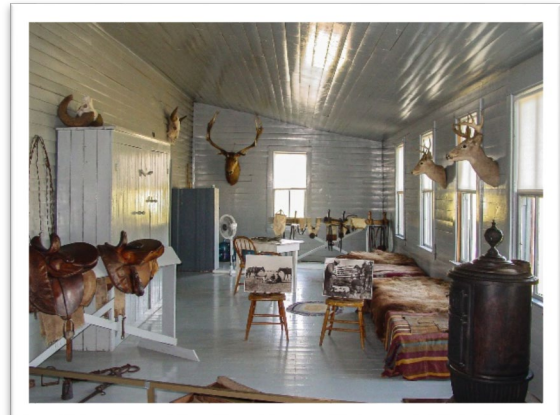
- Looking up, I saw the ceiling was totally covered with cowboy hats “nailed” to the old wooden beams
- Listening to the conversations of the locals, I detected an accent virtually indistinguishable from that of Canadians

Needless to say, it was a very interesting and enjoyable evening at the Little Missouri Saloon. But eventually, it came time to return to my hotel room.

The next morning, after a hearty “cowboy breakfast” at the Iron Horse Restaurant, I explored the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Once again, there were large herds of Buffalo, as well as many areas where Prairie Dogs had established extensive “towns”. It was fascinating to see the “comingling” of the giant Buffalo and the tiny Prairie Dogs!



Just southwest of the national park I spotted a sign for “Chateau de Mores State Historical Site” where an actor portrayed the role of “Marquis de Mores” as he told the history of the site. The Chateau de Mores was an historic home built in the 1880’s by the Marquis de Mores as a hunting lodge and summer home. The Marquis was a French aristocrat and entrepreneur who immigrated to the Dakota Territory where he planned to slaughter cattle and cold pack the meat for shipment to the east coast via refrigerated rail cars, bypassing the shipment of cattle to meat packing plants in Chicago. He built a large slaughterhouse, meat packing plant, and icehouse, as well as several other buildings in Medora, including St Mary’s Catholic church.

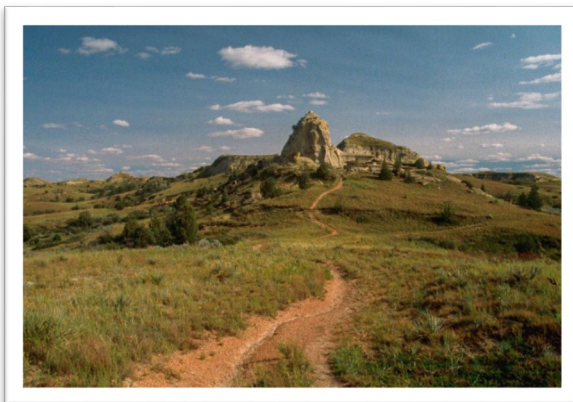




The town and his business did well for the next three years, until a prolonged drought devastated the region and his business collapsed. Shortly thereafter, the Marquis and his family returned to France, leaving the town of Medora with a fascinating history of the “old west”.



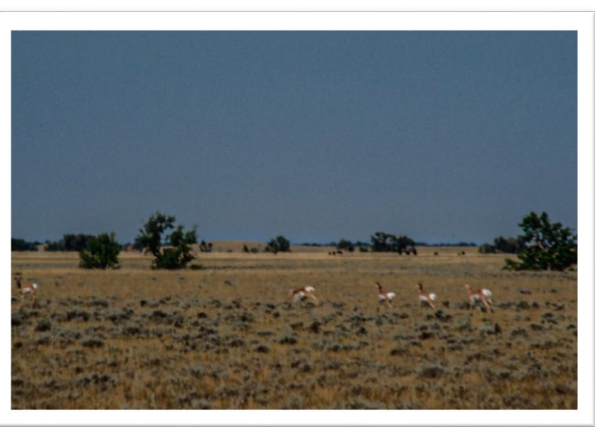
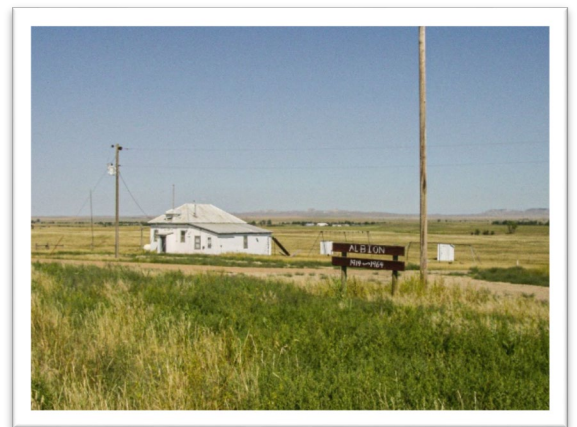
From Chateau de Mores I followed a narrow, rough gravel road for 40 miles to a mysterious site marked on the North Dakota highway map as “Burning Coal Vein and Columnar Cedars”. Although it was a long slow drive, I found the site to be true to its name. As I approached the top of a small hill, I saw a flame burning from a large crack in the rock. The theory was that bands of soft lignite coal just below the surface were ignited either by lightning or a prairie fire. It was first discovered by European settlers in the mid-1800’s and has continuously burned since then. Nearby was a small grove of “columnar cedars”, a variant of Rocky Mountain Red Cedar.



After exploring the site, I was back on the gravel road headed south toward the border with South Dakota. Along the way, I passed a small hill known as “White Bluff”, and at an elevation of 3506 feet above sea level, it’s the highest point in the entire state of North Dakota. As the sun was setting, I came to the small town of Bowman, North Dakota and soon spotted the “El-Vu Motel”, the one and only in town. When I entered my room for the night, the first thing I noticed was the abundance of flies! But just as quickly, I saw the large fly swatter lying on the table – fortunately. That evening, upon the recommendation of the motel staff, I had dinner at “Windy’s Restaurant”, where the menu leaned heavily toward beef – so the obvious choice was another delicious steak.



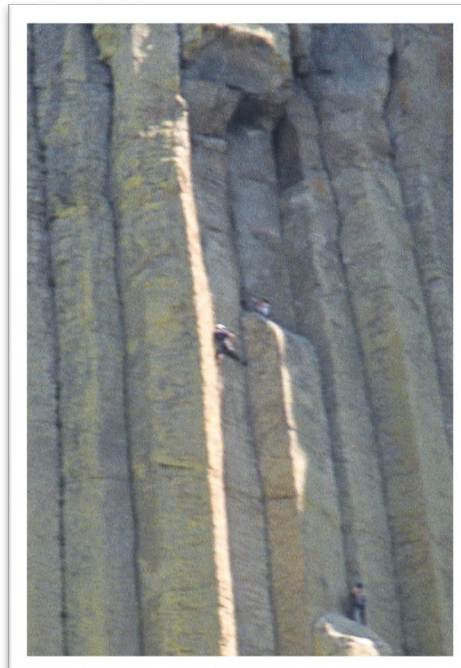
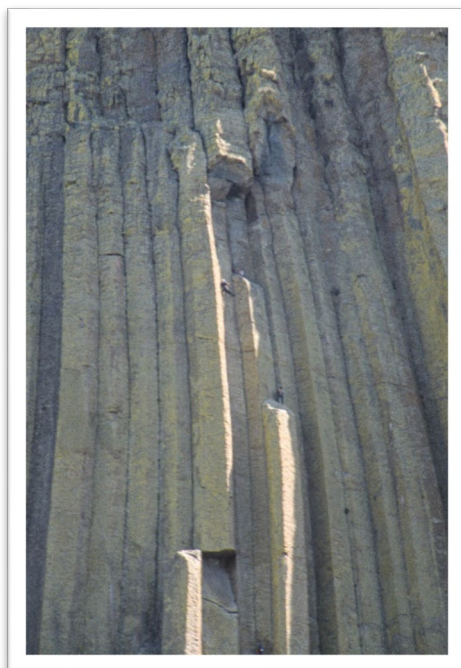
The next day, I filled up with gas at the Sinclair Truck Stop and grabbed a cup of hot coffee for 15 cents! Then I followed a couple of semis to Buffalo, South Dakota and stopped at the “Oasis Café” for breakfast, along with a lot of truckers. As I sat down at a table in the corner, I noticed there was only one employee, a young man who waited tables, did the cooking, and the cleaning as well. Nearby, a small group of old men, including the local sheriff, were playing cards. On the wall above their table was a sign that read “don’t talk about yourself, we’ll do that when you leave”! By that time, I came to the conclusion that Buffalo was a very small town indeed. Leaving the old men and sheriff to “talk about me”, I left the café and headed down a very narrow gravel road for over 50 miles into a remote part of southeastern Montana, past the abandoned town of Albion, where a hand painted sign read “Albion 1914 – 1964”. And the entire time I never saw another car on the road. (A sure sign the town had been abandoned) However, I did see a lot of Pronghorn Antelope grazing alongside cattle and horses.



As I continued south toward the Wyoming border, beautiful views of “Devil’s Tower” slowly came into sight as the road made its way through the pine covered hills of northeastern Wyoming. When I finally arrived at Devil’s Tower National Monument, I watched more than half a dozen climbers ascending the

vertical rock of the south face, which rises almost 900 feet from the base. The “tower” is actually the remains of a massive volcanic cone that erupted over 40 million years ago.





As I stood at the base of the enormous monolith, the climbers seemed like tiny ants clinging to the rock. Devil's Tower was first climbed in 1893 by local ranchers using primitive wooden ladders and ropes. It wasn't long before I became aware of a large number of motorcycles, black leather, and "biker babes". They had come from the world famous "Sturgis Motorcycle Rally" held the previous weekend. In an effort to escape the crowds, I hiked along the trail that surrounds the tower, and for most of the time, I was on my own. As I made my way around the base of the giant monolith, its shape and color changed in subtle ways. It is truly unique and like nothing else in the world!

As the day approached sunset, I left Devil's Tower and Wyoming for South Dakota. I passed through the small town of Sundance and entered the Black Hills National Forest, a region of dense pine forests and high mountains, in sharp contrast to the flat grasslands of the surrounding area. Soon I came to Spearfish, South Dakota and discovered a beautiful old lodge near the head of Spearfish Canyon, in the very heart of the Black Hills. The lodge was an immense log structure with a gorgeous, massive stone fireplace, above which a large Buffalo head was mounted.





After checking into a lovely room with a deck overlooking the Spearfish River, I enjoyed a delicious dinner of “Cajun Trout”, served with a Thyme cream sauce over Minnesota wild rice in the “Latchstring Restaurant”. It was a most enjoyable dinner as I sat outside on the deck while the sun slowly disappeared behind the mountains!

[stay tuned for Part 3 – “From the Black Hills back to North Dakota and return home”]



