

“Try Out West for Vacation!”

I'm not sure if my family is a glutton for punishment or if I just plan a vacation that nearly kills us all. (I actually do know which it is.) I feel if we are spending the money to visit a place we need to keep moving and see everything we can, don't you? Anyway, whatever the case, I have learned to plan a relaxing vacation vs. a “fit it all in” vacation and I've done both out to the beautiful west!

Our first family trip included sights such as Mt. Rushmore, the Badlands, Yellowstone, and the Tetons. It was 13 fun filled, travel filled, and gorgeous country filled days. If you are interested in seeing those sights and more, keep reading and then plan a trip of your own. It was magnificent.

Colorado/Wyoming: Day 1

We took this trip in June as soon as the kids were off from school, hoping it wouldn't be quite a crowded as in July or August. We flew from Tampa, Florida to Denver Colorado and then I had planned an hour and 30 minute drive up to Cheyenne, Wyoming that evening. If you want to stretch this part out a bit, spend the night in Denver and the next day exploring Rocky Mountain National Park. It too is beautiful.

Wyoming/South Dakota: Day 2



From Cheyenne we headed up north, along the east border of Wyoming and eventually took a right hand turn into South Dakota. The very first picture on our trip was the breakfast spot we stopped at called the, “Outpost Café”. We hadn't seen anything marvelous yet so this seemed pretty cool. We were “Out West”!

Our goal was to visit Mt. Rushmore and then head over to Deadwood for the night. (My husband and I had been watching the HBO Series, “Deadwood”

and we wanted to see what it looked like today.) Anyway, on our way, we traveled through the black Hills of South Dakota and stopped to see the “Crazy Horse” Monument.

This is a monument in progress to commemorate the famous Indian, Crazy Horse. You can see the bronze sculpture of the eventual end product, and how far they have come in the sculpting. While you are there you may watch a video explaining the Crazy Horse story and even watch as puffs of smoke come from the rocks as blasting is taking place.



Next was Mt. Rushmore in all its majesty. If you haven't been there in a few years you will be amazed at the new facilities they have built as an entrance, in this picture, and the new building to house the story of Mt. Rushmore.

OK, who can name the Presidents? Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln. Right! And a picture can't even touch how immense and how awesome this monument truly is.





Although for us this cemetery with the graves of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane was because of the Deadwood show, these people were a part of our American history.



The “Gem” was the local watering hole in the program and we found it right away. We ate dinner there and had fun talking about some of the events that occurred there on the show. Of course there were pictures of the famous early Americans and the real history was nice to read about.

The Badlands: Day 3

On day three, we took off and headed back east a bit to visit the Badlands National Park. As you are driving along, you can see it coming up. It starts as rolling low rock and turns into high jagged rock....really bad lands! Hahaha!



Once we reached a couple of the lookout places, you could really see that this was a land that little life could survive on. There were the scorpions, snakes and lizards that would expect, and then some of the prettiest flowers I’ve seen.





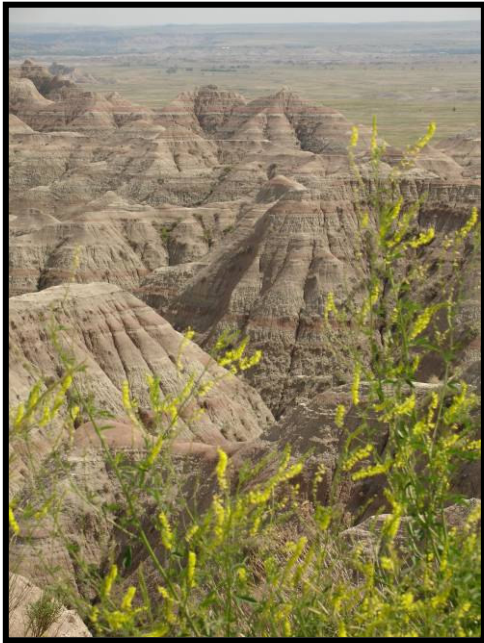
Just look at the prickers on this thistle! It is beautiful and it knows how to protect itself!



Then with how dry and hot I might add, it was in the Badlands, I was still amazed that cactus plants were thriving. Their blooms were incredibly hearty and their yellow stood out like shiny diamonds in the rough surroundings.



I was so inspired by the beauty of these flowers, I took dozens of photos and then spent a couple weeks painting them. This is one of my favorites because I did a fairly good job with the shadows....finally!



This is just one more shot of the stark beauty of the Badlands National Park. Even a simple wildflower looks full of life against the rough, weatherworn background.

South Dakota/Cody, Wyoming: Day 4

We left Deadwood the next day and headed toward Cody Wyoming. This was at least a 7 hour drive, but we had a stop planned at the Devil's Tower at about the $\frac{1}{4}$ mark. This was a marvelous stop because there are trails around the Tower and you can watch people climbing it. The view from some of the trails was pretty too.



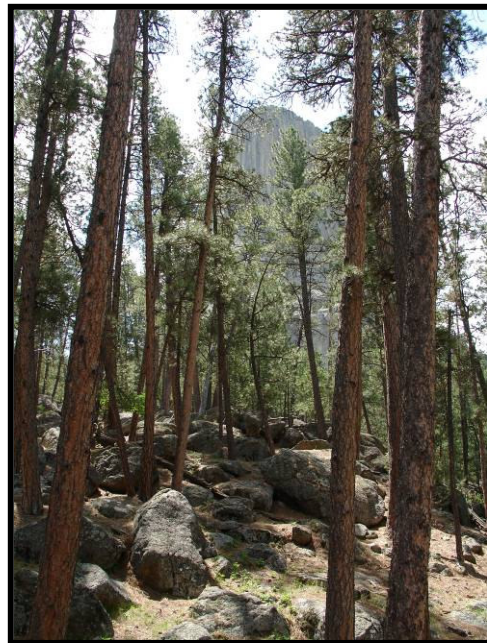
Of course Mom is the only one trying to take a serious photo as everyone else is so sick of riding in the car they can't even think straight. Mind you, we are only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the way to Cody.



I added this shot hoping you could see the people scaling the side of Devil's Tower. One is wearing yellow and the lower one is in white. YIKES!



The trails around the Devil's Tower traverse some hilly and rocky landscape. You do have to do some climbing but it's on paths that have been black topped. It does offer superb views of the Tower and great sites for family photographs. Definitely add this to your "must see" list!



Luckily over the next several hours, there were reasons to stop along the way and take a break. Here, we stopped because there was enough snow to make an actual snowball, and Cameron had been living in Florida for almost a year at this point and had missed winter for the first time. Both he and his sister were thrilled to pay in it for a bit. I stayed near the car with the camera!

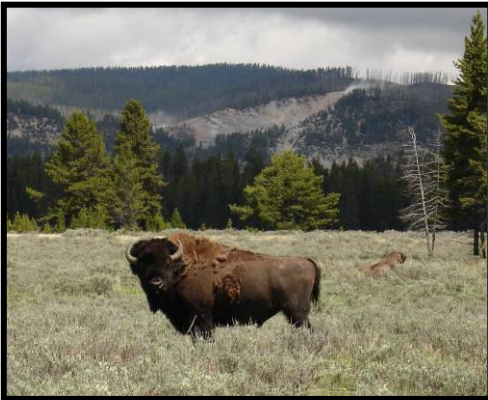


We arrived in Cody late and pretty much went to eat and up to bed. The reason no one stayed up wasn't because of the exhausting trip, but because the local hotel we stayed in didn't have TV's in the room. Plus, it was very old, rickety and set up quite strange. My suggestion to you is don't always listen to the "romance" copy written about the local flavor. We will stay at known names from now on until we get a chance to check the places out in person, and then book our stay for the next visit!!

Cody, Wyoming/Yellowstone: Day 5, 6 & 7



It took about 3 hours to drive from Cody to West Yellowstone which is the town on the other side of the National Park. However, winding through Yellowstone, around the upper loop, the sights became more and more interesting. This photo is of our first bear sighting!



This big bison seemed to see us just as we saw him! Notice that he is losing some of his winter fur so he looks a little more scraggly than he normally would!

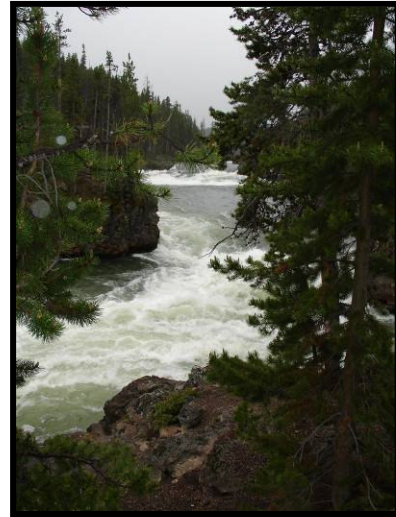


The terrain in Yellowstone National Park changes almost around every curve. Here you see the Mud Volcanoes. Basically, they are huge open holes of bubbling mud. It would have been an incredible sight for the early traveler's in America!! Heck, we were amazed!



There are expansive pasture lands full of roaming wildlife. Here are a few more bison grazing on the grasses.

Around the corner and between two areas of higher rock is a rushing river with white frothing rapids that eventually lead to a beautiful waterfall.



Then there are miles and miles of trees that have been burned yet their trunks remain to oversee the re-growth that is now about 4-5 feet tall in some areas.

And the craziest sites are those areas of steam escaping from the ground along the road here and there. I read that Yellowstone is basically a huge live volcano and we all have to thank heaven the earth allows the pressure to release through the mud volcanoes and all this steam!





But, it was the animals that we were after. We spent a couple days exploring the park just scanning the different areas for animals. And, like this elk, many times they were grazing right by the road!



This bison couldn't have been more than 5 feet from our car. He did cause quite a traffic jam as every car stopped long enough to take a picture or two.



More elk, but these must have been the moms and kids 'cause we didn't see any antlers in this bunch.



I think this was the one moose we were able to get a photograph of on this trip. She was in a small pond looking for something to eat. Again, quite a traffic jam was created.

You can't talk about Yellowstone National Park without mentioning Old Faithful. And, it is just that. Old Faithful will erupt between one hour and one and a half hours after the last eruption depending on the duration of the last eruption. So, you can see Old Faithful shoot boiling water anywhere from 106 to 185 feet quite a few times in one day! It is quite a sight to see.



Well, as usual, I've talked on too long. There are still 5 days left in this trip that takes us south to the Tetons, then into Colorado to see the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. We traveled down to Silverton and took the train into Durango and then rested our last day in Vail. Some of the photos are beautiful, so I'll write a sequel, just so you can experience the more of the gorgeous west.

Until then...keep travelin'!

Shari

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