

# ***Western States Driving Trip***

***August 2020***



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## **Tuesday August 4**

We had dinner at Stone Creek in Montgomery before driving to the airport Marriott for the night.

## **Wednesday August 5**

We were up before 6:30 and caught the 6:45 shuttle to the airport. We were checked in and getting a Starbucks coffee before 7:15 and were at the gate well before our 8:45 departure. The flight was uneventful, but we were a little disappointed that the breakfast was even more lean than the one a few weeks back. Nevertheless, we did get wine and we seemed to be in Salt Lake City very quickly.

We picked up our rental car and headed out on I-84 east towards Wyoming. We stopped near Park City for a McDonald's and then continued east for another 60 miles. From there, we basically headed north on US89 (with many different route numbers all the way to Jackson Hole, making just one stop for a restroom break.

The scenery was magnificent the whole way; huge Alpine valleys, rolling hills, enormous farms and, eventually, to the awesome sight of the mountains around the town of Jackson – culminating in our first glimpse of the Tetons north of town.

We checked into the Homewood Suites – a rather ordinary hotel but about as cheap (\$400) as we could find in this major tourist destination. Presumably, they are trying to make up for lost business earlier in the year.

We had made a reservation at the Silver Dollar in town (a six-minute walk). Again, the choices were few even when I called at the weekend. It turned out to be a very nice restaurant in one of the oldest hotels in town and we had a very good meal – and a pleasant conversation with the young Turkish waiter, now in his third year here and loving the snowboarding!

## **Thursday August 6**

We walked into the middle of town to have breakfast at the Bunnery (excellent). We then strolled around for a while before returning to the hotel and checking out.



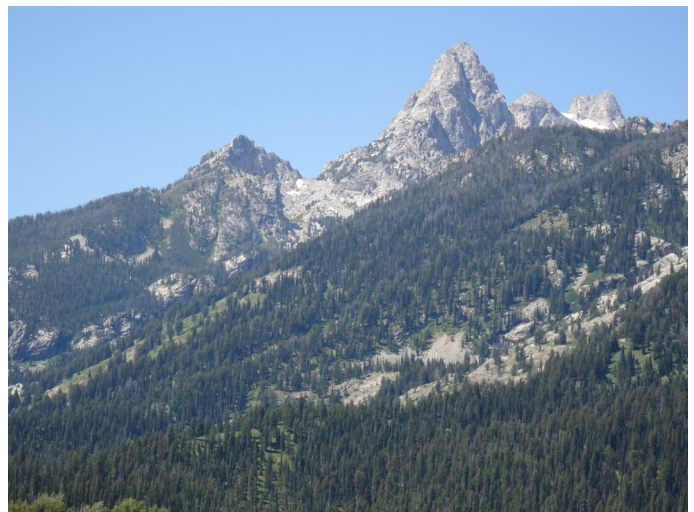




## *Memorial to John Colter of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*

*- First White Man to visit Wyoming*

We drove via Teton Village (very built up since our first visit but seemed to be no bigger than the last time we stayed there) and then on a back road into Teton National Park. We tried to stop at Jenny Lake for some views of the mountains but the parking area and the road for about ½ mile either side was packed. We settled for some spectacular views from a roadside pull off.





We then drove to the top of Signal Mountain (7700 feet, but less than 1000 above the plain) where we had great views of the mountains to the west and the vast Snake River plain to the east. To the north were the hills in Yellowstone.



We then crossed into Yellowstone Park, stopped for a brief nap, and then drove via Grant Village and Old Faithful to the western edge of the park and our hotel in West Yellowstone. The roads were very busy everywhere (even more so than last year, we felt) so the virus doesn't seem to have kept visitors away. Every campsite was full and, as we said, all parking areas were very busy.

I had time for a short walk and made a reservation for dinner in town. We ate at Serenity, a place we had enjoyed twice last year. The food was still very good, but the service left something to be desired. Despite that, we made another reservation for tomorrow; choices in West Yellowstone are very limited.

### **Friday August 7**

I went for a 2 mile walk before breakfast. We ate at The Outpost where we have eaten many times in the past; this time it wasn't as good as we had to return our cold food. Second time was much better!

We left the hotel around 10am and drove into the park for the day.

We had intended to do mostly the northeast section of the main loop but the road was closed for repairs. So, we simply went to Mammoth Hot Springs and then as far as we could on the north side, turning back at Towers. Despite the change, it was a very pleasant drive and we saw thermal activity, the



white Hot Springs, mountains and magnificent vistas at all times. We took a six-mile loop on a dirt road which was very pleasant.



As yesterday, all the main roads and the pull offs were very busy and we swore (again) to avoid July and August for any future visits. Animal sightings, too, were rare this year and we saw about five elk towards the end of the day. Not one bison!

### *The Many Facets of Yellowstone*







We got back to the hotel at 5pm and relaxed until dinner. Tonight's meal at Serenity was much better than last night; same excellent food, but much better service.

### **Saturday August 8**

We walked to the Three Bear restaurant for a very good breakfast and then checked out for our drive to Helena.



***Fun on the Madison River***



We followed exactly the same route as the one we drove a year ago; north to Bozeman, a quick visit to the Missouri Headwaters (far more people here than on previous visits but still not crowded) and then the scenic, non-expressway route to Helena. We checked into the Fairfield around 4pm and had a long relaxing period before dinner downtown at 8pm.



## ***The Headwaters Park***

Tonight we ate at the Mediterranean Grill where we had a tapas-style meal complete with Turkish coffee and baklava – as well as a nice chat with another Turkish waitress.

### **Sunday August 9**

We had breakfast at a nearby Perkins and then drove to Missoula and back – both very scenic drives. We spent maybe 2 hours in Missoula and had coffee, a walk along the river front and stopped to see the Ad-





venture Cycling headquarters. A lovely, easy day out.



## ***A Beautiful Drive***

Tonight we ate downtown again at the Bella Roma. We had eaten here last year also and tonight was as good as we had remembered; grappa included!



### **Monday August 10**

We had breakfast at Perkins again after checking out and then drove non-stop to Billings. We avoided expressways and essentially followed US Route 12. It's two lane most of the way but has a 70 MPH speed limit so it was an easy drive through some fantastic countryside; mountains, wheat fields, cattle ranges and brush.

We had a Starbucks lunch as we entered Billings and then checked into the Fairfield around 3pm. I went for a three-mile walk and noticed how much more humid it was here versus the past several days.

Tonight we ate at Outback, very close to the hotel, and had a good meal.

### **Tuesday August 11**

We had breakfast at Denny's next to the hotel and were on the road before 9:30. Our first stop was at the Little Bighorn National Monument, site of Custer's Last Stand. The park sits on the hillside of the fa







mous battle and grave sites for both US forces and Indians are marked. One memorial recognizes all the soldiers who were killed and another pays tribute to the Cheyenne and other Indian tribes who fought to retain their land.

The area is also a National Cemetery with remains of service people through the Vietnam War, by which time the area was filled and no longer accepts veterans.

We spent about an hour in the park before driving east on Route 12 towards Rapid City. It was another very scenic route with lots of ranch land, some forests and a surprising amount of green.



After about 3 hours of easy, 65 MPH driving, we were suddenly in a major traffic holdup. We were now within striking distance of Sturgis and had already seen lots of motorcyclists, but this looked like a major staging area for the festival. There were hundreds of bikes park on every spare piece of land and the roadside was filled with bikers. There was also a large police presence, although the majority of the flashing lights were on a road south of the one we were on. We were essentially at a standstill for about 20 minutes before the road seemed to open up and we could drive on. It was never clear exactly why there were so many police vehicles nor why we were stopped completely – no





accident or other incident as far as we saw.

So, we eventually made it to a small town called Belle Fourche, which claims to be the geographical center of the United States. Actually, a field about 20 miles from town bears the flag at the exact spot but the town has built a rather pleasant park area for convenience. The claim is a little obtuse but relates to the fact that when Alaska and Hawaii were added as states, the geographical center shifted north and west from the previous spot in Kansas. It does, however, bear the seal of approval of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey!



Then it was on to Sturgis, home of the annual motorbike rally and gathering for the past 80 years. It seems the whole town is converted into one giant parking lot (for bikes) and the streets are lined with everything bike (the vehicles themselves, tires, mechanical parts, clothing, etc, etc) and food and drink stalls. Thousands of bikers wander this maze in every kind of dress imaginable. Trump signs and memorabilia are proudly displayed.



We drove through the town and then found our way back to the highway and on to our hotel on the east



side of Rapid City. We had dinner at a local restaurant and both had the walleye – excellent!

### Wednesday August 12

We had breakfast at a local Perkins (30-minute wait for a table) and then drove via I-90 to Wall and spent the obligatory hour in the Wall Drug store. It's much the same as it was 30+ years ago on our first visit; lots of stuff you don't need but buy anyway.



Then we drove south into the Badlands National Park where we were to spend the next several hours. Again, it has been 30 years or more since our last visit and, while the main features looked familiar, we saw a lot that was "new".



The mostly gray-white formations (with some pinks, yellows and other shades) have formed as a result of erosion and the result is a series of towers (many flat-topped), spires, and thin wedges that form a "wall" some sixty miles long. This wall separates the upper and lower plains, both of which are broad, flat grass-covered regions. The whole presents a contrasting picture of table-top green punctuated by jagged protrusions that rise almost vertically forming a set that would make Disney proud.



We stopped at probably a dozen of the overlooks and then drove out of the eastern side which is perhaps the most picturesque as the drive climbs from the lower to the upper plain by cutting through the “wall” in a zig-zag fashion.



## *The Badlands*





Just outside the park we visited the Minuteman Visitor Center – a “museum” dedicated to the Cold War years and the build-up of nuclear arsenals by the US and the Soviet Union. The Minuteman silos were dotted throughout this region and one is available for tours, although we were too late for one today. However, the Center covers the period and the program very thoroughly and presents a somewhat chilling picture of the years leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall – especially when some of the “near misses” are described. Obviously we lived through the period and didn’t see it as scary as it probably was – perhaps because we didn’t know about some of the things that almost triggered disaster.

We drove back to Rapid City via a road parallel to I-90 but about 10 miles south of the Park so we had a 50 mile view of the peaks of the Badlands. It was a very interesting day.

Tonight we ate at the same restaurant as last night and enjoyed another good meal.

### Thursday August 13

We had an early breakfast at Perkins and then started our day in the Rapid City area before driving to Casper, WY. First, we visited Mount Rushmore and spent about an hour there admiring the artwork and learning about the project and its “building”. Obviously, the faces themselves haven’t changed since our first visit but the whole area facing the mountain seemed to have changed immensely, with a much-enlarged visitor area and viewing platform. We were fortunate





to get there before the crowds and were able to enjoy the video, the exhibits and, of course, the four presidents.



On leaving, we stopped in the small town of Keystone (much enlarged but a pleasant town) for a coffee, before driving about 20 miles to the Custer State Park. Here we drove the 18-mile wildlife loop and saw a herd of bison (probably 50) very close to the road, as well as quite a few deer. So, here and at the Badlands, we saw far more wildlife than in two days in Yellowstone! The Custer State Park is a beautiful area even without the wildlife but seeing so many bison just made it all the more interesting.



***Custer National Park***





From the park, we drove through the town of Custer (lots of bikers) and recalled the time we had been towed here from within the park after our car stalled and wouldn't start. Fortunately (!) the tow truck owner also owned a motel, so we spent an unscheduled night here. It, too, has grown significantly and now has several chain hotels.

Near Custer is the Crazy Horse carving. This has been a work in progress for seventy years and even today (as the last time we were here) there was little evidence of progress. What has changed are the facilities around the carving; gift shops, exhibits, Indian museum, etc. There are even more grand plans for the area including a university, a train ride to the complex and many other additions. It would seem that the carving itself (to be the largest in the world) is almost intended as an unfinished





work so that the rest of the complex can thrive and grow. Maybe they should spend more of the \$12 admission fee on the work itself rather than the associated “town” – or maybe not!

From Crazy Horse we returned to Custer for a coffee and then drove the 200 miles to Casper non-stop. It was a very scenic drive all the way and the fast roads allowed us to get to Casper by 6:15. Sufficient time to clean up and make a reservation at a local steakhouse for dinner.



## *Custer—a favorite for bikers*

### **Friday August 14**

Today was a long drive from Casper back to Salt Lake City. However, we followed a non-expressway route until we reached the Utah border and let the GPS direct us. It turned out to be a very pleasant and interesting drive along some very minor county roads, but which allowed us to maintain a reasonable speed. In what appeared to be the middle of nowhere, still in Wyoming, we saw a huge Exxon Mobil facility and wondered exactly what was its product. (We later found out that it is a natural gas plant).

Interstate 80 from the Utah line to Park City was very busy but then it was an easy run into the city. We arrived at the Marriott around 4pm and I had time for a walk before dinner at Ruth's Chris.

### **Saturday August 15**

Our flight home wasn't until 6:30pm so after breakfast, a walk and checking out, we drove south to Logan before heading east and then north on country roads until we met Interstate 80 for the drive back to the airport. It was a very pretty drive through the mountains and provided a good finish to this vacation. Our flight was on time and we arrived home close to 1am.







