



Badlands — Larry's Version

5.19.21

On the drive west out of Minnesota we stopped at the rest area with the Dignity statue — 50 feet of stainless steel, a Native American woman with a star quilt, some of the diamonds painted blue. Impressive from a distance, worth the closer look too.



Badlands National Park again — we'd been through once before, back in 2014. Part of the draw this time was meeting up with some activist friends driving out from Chicago for the weekend. We saw the park on our own since they'd driven straight through and needed to rest first. Funny what sticks and what doesn't from a place you've seen before — some of it came right back, some of it not at all. The layered sandstone formations never get old, and we hit an area with red and yellow sand hills set against green grass that was something to see. Bison everywhere. I climbed up onto the truck's luggage rack to get close-up shots safely — that's exactly what I'd installed the rack for. Did some hiking too, though the Badlands is one of those parks where you see plenty just from the road or a short walk off it.



Part of the drive took us onto what they call a high-clearance road, which is a polite way of saying I spent a good stretch fighting the SUV along ruts that looked like they hadn't been touched since covered wagons made them. The ruts have their own opinion about which direction the vehicle should go, regardless of yours. I called it fun. Lu did not agree with that characterization — she spent most of it gripping her knees and trying to



counterbalance whichever way we were tipping. Exhausting for both of us, though I'll admit I enjoyed it more than she did.

People ask me sometimes what's worth seeing if you're not really a hiker. The Badlands loop road is a good answer. So is Arches. So is the wildlife loop through Custer State Park, not far from here.

Met our friends for dinner that evening — they were tent camping in the rain, and we found out the park café was takeout-only because of the pandemic, so everyone regrouped at our site. Rearranged things to fit two extra people. They'd brought beer, we had wine, and we all had Indian tacos — fry bread instead of tortillas, a good Southwest staple, and the fry bread was clearly fresh. Good company, though they headed out early to catch a sunset from a spot they had in mind. Still drizzling and overcast, so we passed on that part.



Sunday, the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site — visitor's center, the Delta-01 command center, and Delta-09, the actual silo, with a disabled training missile under a plexiglass dome. Cellphone-guided tour for the Delta sites, dial a number and follow along by section — a good way to get real information across without wading through wall text. Walked us through how the missiles worked and what became of them after the 1991 disarmament treaty, the whole logic of Mutually Assured Destruction laid out plainly. Strange to think these sat here for thirty years mostly unknown to the public, and that a newer generation of ICBMs is still active today, treaties or no treaties.

Took a road labeled "Old Ne Road" — turned out to mean Old Northeast Road — only partly shown on one map, missing from the rest. No other cars, no clear sense of where it

was headed. Rock formations gradually smoothed out into farmland, and eventually we hit 90 and looped back into the park. Full circle, more or less by accident.

Wrapped up the evening at a boardwalk overlook above the canyon, where we watched a shirtless kid in cargo shorts and hiking boots running and leaping across the rock formations below like he owned the place — somebody up on the walkway, probably family, kept yelling for him to hold still for a photo. His name was Jonah. He'd clearly done this route before, stopping right at the edge for selfies before moving on to the next peak. Impressive, and a little hard to watch.



Monday the 17th we worked around some Zoom meetings, then in the afternoon visited the Prairie Homestead, a separate attraction from the park proper — original buildings still standing, including a dirt-floor sod house from 1909. Sod houses are supposed to last six or seven years by most accounts; this one's held up a lot longer than that, probably thanks to



the heavy timbered roof. Family lived there into the 1930s, and by all accounts the woman who raised her family there missed it for the rest of her life, hard as that existence must have been — crops always at the mercy of weather and pests, limited water, wind that never lets up. The homestead's also home to the only all-white prairie dog town around — not albino, just black-skinned with white fur, like a polar bear. Started with one rescued animal thirty years back and the whole colony turned white from there.

Closed out our time in the Badlands with a run through the Baja Motorized Use Area, an off-road stretch clearly popular with dirt bikes and ATVs. More of that deceptively deep-rutted “fun.” We came out the other side caked in mud, tires and undercarriage looking like we'd finished some kind of endurance event.



May 18, 2021 — Wounded Knee Memorial



Pine Ridge surprised me — I expected more of the same dry brown terrain as the Badlands, but it opens into rolling hills and pine forest before long. The Wounded Knee massacre site is marked with nothing more than a red metal sign and white lettering, laying out the story of the last armed clash between the Sioux and the U.S. Army in 1890. Bad on both sides, badly conceived from the start, and it still

weighs on the people here. Locals sell handicrafts out of the parking lot. A woman named Valerie approached us, apologizing for taking her mask off, though she was hard to follow regardless since she had no teeth. She walked us through the sign, pointed out the cemetery across the road, and showed us roughly where the encampment had stood. We bought a beaded rawhide dreamcatcher from her for the car and turned down similar offers from others.

The cemetery's still active — a large fenced mass grave in the center, fences and headstones strung with bright cloth, artificial flowers, and American flags on the veterans' graves. Plenty of grave markers showing painfully short lifespans. Despite all that, the place has an odd cheerfulness to it, all that color snapping in the constant wind.



Pulled into the campground at Belle Fourche that evening and Lu was thrilled with the quiet — lake, birdsong, a good sunset. She was looking forward to yoga in the morning. Instead we both got woken at 3 a.m. by wind howling into the trailer — no storm, no clouds, stars out clear, just wind clocking around 16 miles an hour and not letting up. Ran too strong into the late morning for yoga or the bike ride we'd been considering. Died down by 11, right about when we were ready to move on anyway. Plains weather does what it wants.