

Montana visit rekindled love for travel

Road trip to western-most Hinsdale, followed by detour to South Dakota were a delight

By Pamela Lannom
plannom@thehinsdalean.com

When I first talked to Dan about traveling to another Hinsdale, I gave him two choices. We could pick the one in New York, a mere eight hours away, or we could go to Montana and stop by to see Uncle Glenn in South Dakota on the way home.

"Let's do it," he said, when I mentioned the second option.

I was shocked. We'd be traveling more than 2,500 miles round trip, spending more than 37 hours in the car. On the flip side, we'd get

to visit Glenn and his wife Sharon in Wall and see Mt. Rushmore.

The verdict is in: it was worth the trip.

Our visit to Hinsdale, Mont., was absolutely wonderful, as were the people I met, whom you've read a bit about over the past two weeks.

South Dakota was amazing as well.

We checked off two major attractions our first full day in town: Mt. Rushmore and Custer State Park.

Mt. Rushmore is a common destination for families (as evidenced by the crowd), but Dan and I never made it

there as kids.

We were not disappointed as adults.

No matter how many photos you've seen of the sculptures of Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln, standing in front of it is awe-inspiring. Learning about the 14-year project, which removed 800 million pounds of rock from Mount Rushmore, was incredibly interesting.

Ainsley enjoyed the gorgeous patio, where you can enjoy an ice cream cone almost big enough to serve one of the massive presidents watching over you.

After lunch we headed to

Custer State Park, looking for buffalo and burros on the loose. I soon realized the highlight of the park was the gorgeous landscape of the Black Hills.

After driving much of Wildlife Loop Road, we found the burros, hanging out in a little parking area with half a dozen or so cars. We violated two park rules when we spotted them: we got out of our car and fed them (with a glazed jumbo honey bun Glenn had picked up at a gas station on the way). Our transgression is captured on film in one of my favorite photos from the trip.

As for the buffalo, we had about given up and were headed out of the park when we spotted a single one lounging in the grass. It was quite anti-climatic.

The next day we visited Badlands National Park, which more than made up for the shortage of buffalo at Custer. Our drive down Sage Creek Rim Road took us past two large groups, one of which crossed the road right in front of our car. We've seen the buffalo at Brookfield Zoo, but watching them out on the prairie is altogether different.

Even more plentiful than the buffalo were the prairie dogs, which do enormous damage to the land digging their holes but are a big hit with the kids. Ainsley was no exception.

Her favorite part of the park, though, was climbing the formations. I enjoyed her enthusiasm and the breathtaking views but had to work hard to keep my protective instincts in check.

We finished out our time in Wall with a second trip to the Badlands for more exploring and an extended shopping trip at Wall Drug, where Glenn has been working part-time to keep busy in retirement.

The world's largest drug store is like nothing I've ever seen, with a 530-seat cafe, travelers chapel, video arcade, backyard play area, roaring T. rex and more, plus an unbelievable selection of merchandise ranging from kitschy souvenirs to

■ HINSDALE, MONT. 59241

*This is the last
in a four-part series
on our visit to
Hinsdale, Mont.*

gorgeous cowboy boots.

Our two-day drive home was uneventful, except for our stop at the Ingalls Homestead in DeSmet, S.D. I think I was as excited as Ainsley to see the place where Laura and her family spent the years described in "Little Town on the Prairie" and a handful of other books in the "Little House" series.

I'll admit I was a bit nervous before we embarked on this journey. I wasn't sure how Ainsley — or Dan and I, for that matter — would handle all the time in the car. I wasn't sure what I would find in Hinsdale, Mont.

I had no reason to worry. The trip far exceeded my expectations in every category.

After years of taking an annual vacation in Saugatuck, Mich., I had forgotten what it's like to travel to a completely unfamiliar destination. This trip reminded me of the thrill of discovering a place for the first time, of seeing landscapes that are completely different than any you've seen before and of observing a way of life that is diametrically opposite to the one you live at home. Most of America is not like our Hinsdale or the metropolitan Chicagoland area. Most of the country is farmland or prairie or desert or mountain range.

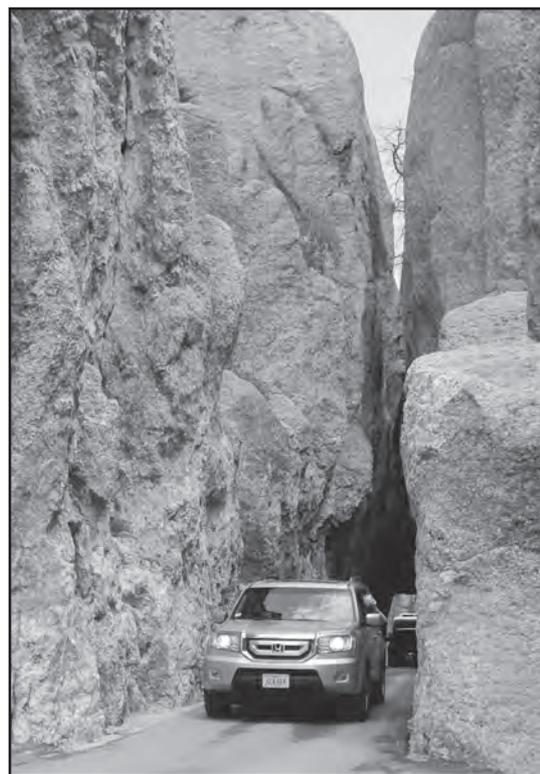
Samuel Johnson had it right.

"The use of traveling is to regulate imagination with reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, see them as they are," he wrote.

This trip not only introduced me to four new states (Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota), it reminded me how much more of this great nation there is to explore.

"I haven't been everywhere," writer Susan Sontag once noted, "but it's on my list."

Until the next journey ...



Seeing Mount Rushmore for the first time was one of the highlights of our journey home from Hinsdale, Mont. We also enjoyed driving through Custer State Park and seeing several burros, one of which surprised Ainsley with its enthusiasm for the honey bun she had in her hand. Cars, including our own, had no problem passing through this narrow spot on the 14-mile Needles Highway through the park, but we all were a little nervous watching a tour bus try to make it through. (photos by Pamela Lannom)