



# Family Adventure

## in the Pine Ridge & Sandhills Regions of Nebraska

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Photos by TheTravelingBornsteins.com

Decades ago, I traveled numerous times on I-80 between Chicago and Denver. My husband and I would take short breaks for gas and a quick bite to eat. As college students, and later as parents, we hurried to reach our destination. We stopped for one night and then continued on. Hundreds of miles of open farmland dulled our senses. The monotonous landscape appeared to last forever. It never occurred to us that any of the interstate exits might lead to something different.

A few weeks ago, we explored the Pine Ridge and Sandhills regions of Nebraska. We are now receptive to discovering some of Nebraska's gems. The Pine Ridge area borders both Wyoming and South Dakota whereas the Sandhills region is adjacent to Wyoming. The scenic byways—Bridges to Buttes Byway and 385 Gold Rush Byway—traverse through these areas.

The terrain in northwest Nebraska has unique features. In the Pine Ridge section, there are open valleys dotted with bluffs and buttes. This location offers a plethora of outdoor activities set in a geologically diverse environment that is south of the Black Hills. The Sandhills region is inundated with grass covered sand dunes that look like giant waves. It has the Western Hemisphere's largest grass-covered stabilized sand dune formations. Rivers weave their way through this rolling landscape. Two unique attractions caught our attention so we also planned a detour to Alliance.

Even though we didn't have our kids or grandkids in tow, I'm recommending the Pine Ridge and Sandhills region for family adventures. There are inside and outside kid-friendly attractions that

are enjoyable, engaging, and educational. There's also plenty that will appeal to older and younger couples without children.

To help plan your future trip, I'm providing an overview of the key places. The pace and the number of stops will be dependent on your family's travel style. Be prepared for some dusty gravel roads. Rattlesnake signs provide warnings whenever this reptile population is prevalent. Keep in mind that there may be other attractions along the way. For maps and additional information visit the [WestNebraska.com](http://WestNebraska.com) website.

Nebraska offers a road trip incentive program with tiered prizes and drawings. For more info visit [www.nebraskapassport.com](http://www.nebraskapassport.com)

### **CRAWFORD-BIG GAME CAPITAL OF NEBRASKA** **Fort Robinson State Park**

Some visitors may want to begin and end their trip at this multi-purpose destination. Others may simply spend the night. The lodging season lasts from April 1 to November 30 and includes single rooms, cabins, and accommodations that handle large groups. During the summer season, the Fort Robinson Inn serves three meals per day.

Activities include hayrack breakfast rides, horseback trail rides, pony rides horse drawn history tours, jeep rides, stagecoach rides, swimming in an indoor pool, hiking, mountain bike rentals, fishing, golfing, kayak and tube rides, weekly rodeo events, and evening cookouts. Five musicals are performed throughout the summer.

## SANDY'S TRAVEL TIPS

Fort Robinson's rich history comes alive in its 45 buildings and museum set on more than 22,000 acres. This once active military fort operated from 1874 to 1948. Originally, the fort functioned as a post-Civil War Indian Agency protective post. During that era, Crazy Horse was killed, and the Cheyenne Outbreak happened, on this site. Later on, this fort became the country's largest quartermaster remount depot, an Olympic equestrian training center, a training center for World War II dogs, and a prisoner of war camp during World War II.

Its popularity goes hand and hand with the fact that it is Nebraska's largest historic state park. Be aware that guests start making reservations a year in advance.

### High Plains Homestead

Meander along a dirt and gravel road to visit another era. For almost 20 years, this family owned facility has introduced young and old to homestead living. Some of the onsite buildings have been restored while others have been recently built. All of the structures act as mini museums.

Families wanting to get a taste of remote living can reserve one of the six available rooms or the two-bedroom cabin. Kids will love to explore the sheriff's office and jail, one room school, saloon and blacksmith shop. They can also take a dip in the onsite above ground swimming pool. The Drifter Cookshack serves homemade meals three times a day.

### Toadstool Geologic Park

Nearby is one of northwest Nebraska's unique national parks. This park is situated in the Oglala National Grassland. Wind and water have manipulated the clay, ash and sandstone left behind by floods and volcanoes. Geologists study the eroding buttes and ridges while paleontologists are on the lookout for fossils. Unlike the neighboring badlands that distinguish themselves with spectacular colors, these sediments are pale in color and belong to the White River Group.

Even though the formations are muted, the average visitor can't stop taking photos of these 24 to 38 million year old landforms. There are two trails to explore—a 3-mile trail to the Hudson-Meng Education & Research Center (6-miles round trip) and a mile interpretive loop trail. Campers can choose from six sites and use covered picnic tables for their cookouts or picnics.

### CRAWFORD & HARRISON—NATURE HIKE

#### Hike from Hudson Meng Bison Bonebed to Toadstool Geologic Park

The hike can start from either location. I was unable to make the journey since I was still recovering from foot surgery. My husband began his adventure in a prairie near the entrance to the Hudson-Meng building. Within no time, the terrain became steep and unusual formations were visible. His hiking boots handled the



mud left over from a recent rainstorm. Well into his trek, he encountered two routes. The Hudson Meng Bison trail took a lower path that revealed notable landforms while the Toadstool Loop trail went higher and offered panoramic views.

### HARRISON-FOSSIL AND NATURE

#### Hudson-Meng Bison Bonebed

Sheltered under a simple structure are the remains of hundreds of bison that died about 10,000 years ago. The exposed portion inside the building represents a small section of the ongoing excavation much of which has been returned to its original condition including the remains. Scientists have offered different conclusions as to why so many bison perished in this area. The bison found in this site are extinct and form a link between modern bison and an older species.

#### Agate Fossil Beds National Monument

This less frequented national park displays a large variety of fossils. Inside the Visitor Center, families can watch an informative video and view exhibits that feature a selection of indigenous mammal, bird and fish fossils. A sample of the Cook Collection of

American Indian Artifacts is an added perk for anyone interested in Native American culture. During his lifetime, Cook developed a relationship with the Oglala and Cheyenne. Gifts were exchanged. His family's collection is showcased at this national park.

Two trails provide an outdoor perspective. The Fossil Hills 2.7 mile trail goes to a digging site from the 1900s. The Daemonelex Loop Trail (1 mile) highlights three places where one can observe the fossilized corkscrew burrows of the ancient Paleocaster. This animal is related to small beaver, but acts like a prairie dog. From these trails you can view the natural terrain that has wildflowers, grasses, trees, marshes, and shrubs. Due to its remote location, it may be possible to see indigenous wildlife.

Both Hudson-Meng Bison Bonebed and Agate Fossil Beds National Monument are wonderful place to introduce kids to fossils, radiocarbon dating, and the role of paleontologists.

### **CHADRON- FUR TRADERS, TOUGH COWBOYS, NATIVE AMERICANS, RANCHERS, RAILROADERS AND A STATE COLLEGE Fur Trading Museum**

Sometimes, in a remote location, one comes across an unexpected find. If your family is interested in the history of fur trading and Native American culture, stop here. Inside, visitors can learn more by watching a short video and walking through the main part of the museum that follows a chronological order. Additional exhibits include the largest and most complete collection of guns made for Native Americans, an exhibit commemorating the fur traders who traveled by boat, and textiles traded by Native Americans.

Weather permitting, walk outside to view several structures. The Trading Post building is an authentic reconstruction of James Bordeaux's trading post. This museum has an impressive assortment of souvenirs and books. Few will leave the bookstore/gift shop empty handed. This property is included in the National Register of Historical Places.

### **Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center**

Through Mari Sandoz's (1896-1966) words, people have learned what it was like to live in the Sandhills region during the late 19th century and into the beginning of the twentieth century. With only an elementary education, Mari was able to overcome poverty. She became one of Nebraska's gifted authors and educators. The Nebraska Hall of Fame, the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, and the Western Heritage Center's Hall of Great Westerners have recognized her accomplishments.



This center is located on the tree lined Chadron State College campus. Indigenous wildflowers line the pathway that leads into the building. Several rooms on the main floor display different segments of her life as well as her contributions. An adjacent room has space for special exhibits. The lower level houses the C. F. Coffee Gallery that focuses on the history of cattle ranching. One display highlights the Women of Cattle Country.

### **ALLIANCE- AN OLD RAILROAD AND CATTLE TOWN Knight Museum and Sandhill Center**

This small town museum enables outsiders to appreciate the local history. In a modern and professional manner, life in the Sandhills, Native American life, and the dichotomy between country and town living is intertwined with the impact of the railroad. Engaging, child friendly exhibits will draw families back to the 19th century.

### **Carhenge**

Visitors who have been to Stonehenge in the United Kingdom will be taken aback by this knock off. Towering above the Nebraskan plains, Jim Reinders used 38 vintage automobiles to replicate the mysterious British landmark. The site has several other novel statues. Families can wander through this free venue with a modern gift shop and clean bathroom. Parents traveling with kids are always on the lookout for restrooms.

*To learn more about western Nebraska and worldwide destinations, visit [www.thetravelingbornsteins.com](http://www.thetravelingbornsteins.com). If you travel to any of these sites, I'd love to hear about your adventure. Send an email to [sbornstein@bestversionmedia.com](mailto:sbornstein@bestversionmedia.com).*