

ALL PHOTOS BY JANNA GRABER



Carhenge, a quirky attraction in Alliance.



Cattle at Our Heritage Guest Ranch.

A Road Trip Through Northwestern Nebraska

JANNA GRABER

Scattered among the expansive prairies, wide valleys and mountaintops of America are thousands of rural towns and communities. Travelers often miss these far-flung destinations, but they offer a rewarding, uniquely American experience to those who venture off the beaten path.

That’s especially true in this time of social distancing. The wide-open spaces, free of crowds, offer the chance to explore—and that’s healing after months of isolation.

My sister Debbie and I took a recent road trip to northwestern Nebraska, a sparsely populated region with a rich history, ancient geological formations, and several state or historic parks.

Our destination was Our Heritage Guest Ranch near Crawford, Nebraska, a sprawling ranch tucked in the hills and canyons of Nebraska’s top left corner, some 30 miles from Wyoming and 12 miles from South Dakota.

Since we live near Denver, it was an easy 4.5-hour drive. Denver is the nearest big airport to western Nebraska, while Omaha is a good eight hours away.

As we drove NE-71 up the western side of the state, we often had the road to ourselves. The majority of Nebraska’s 1.9 million residents live in the eastern part of the state, and most of the state is rural. Nebraska is famous for its rich farmland (this is the Land of the Cornhuskers, after all), but western Nebraska has a whole different feel.

Most people imagine Nebraska to be a flat prairie, but the further north we drove, the hillier it got. Here, rugged buttes of clay and sandstone rise from the earth, a visible tribute to the region’s ancient past. The tall ridges are often rich with fossils.

Northwestern Nebraska is ranching country, and we passed field after field of grazing cattle, bison, and longhorn cattle.

Tin-Roof Sundaes and Bowling in Potter

Halfway there, we decided to make a short detour to Potter, population 350. America can thank this little town for the invention of the Tin Roof Sundae, a sugary concoction of ice cream with chocolate syrup, marshmallow cream, and nuts.

We stopped into The Potter Sundry, where

the creation was invented, to sample it for ourselves. The soda fountain looked like it hadn’t changed much since its beginnings in 1916.

“I’d advise you to get a small, because that will sure fill you up,” a local rancher in a cowboy hat advised. He wasn’t kidding. The “small” ice cream treat was enough to feed a small family, but I tackled it all the same.

“The secret is the marshmallow,” said Warren, a retired Kansas pastor who now volunteers to serve tables at the restaurant. The folks at several other tables agreed, and in small-town fashion, soon we were all having a nice conversation—socially distanced, of course.

One local suggested that we stop at the Potter Duckpin Bowling Alley next door. This historic bowling alley, which has been lovingly preserved, is the last remaining duckpin bowling alley west of the Mississippi. You can rent the whole space for your family or group bowling for only \$25 an hour.

While we didn’t have time to bowl, we did make time for a stop at A Collective Gathering, where 25 different vendors sell an eclectic collection of gifts, arts, and specialty foods made in Nebraska.

Scotts Bluff National Monument

Then, we were off to our next stop at the Scotts Bluff National Monument. Known to locals as “The Monument,” this giant bluff rises 800 feet above the floor of the Platte Valley. It’s all that remains of the ancient High Plains that have eroded over millions of years.

Pioneers on wagon trains from the Missouri River must have been awed at the sight of the massive bluff. More than 350,000 pioneers are estimated to have passed through here between 1836 and 1869, and their wagon ruts can still be seen.

We walked a trail along the national monument (it’s free to enter the park), thinking about those days, then drove to the top of the bluff for an expansive view of the valley.

A Twist on Stonehenge

We made one more stop in the town of Alliance, home to a quirky attraction called Carhenge. Carhenge is a replica of Stonehenge in England, the ancient alignment of stones that chart the phases of the sun



Rock formations at Toadstool Geologic Park.



A fossilized spiral beaver burrow at Agate Fossil Beds.



The Broken Spur in Crawford.

Here, rugged buttes of clay and sandstone rise from the earth, a visible tribute to the region’s ancient past. The tall ridges are often rich with fossils.

and moon. Nebraska’s version is created from vintage automobiles from the 1950s and 1960s, with the same dimensions as Stonehenge. It’s free to visit.

Our Heritage Guest Ranch

The sun was low in the sky as we made our way to Our Heritage Guest Ranch. Located 12 miles down a dirt road near Crawford between the Oglala National Grasslands, the Pine Ridge region, and the Badlands of Nebraska, Our Heritage is a working cattle ranch. The ranch has guest accommodations, including a historic guest cottage that sleeps six (\$175 per night) and two apartments in the barn.

The best part of the ranch experience is owner Jean Norman. My sister and I spent a fun morning out with her in her truck as she checked on the cattle, showed us the ranch, and introduced us to her horses. Along the way, she told us stories of how her grandparents homesteaded the ranch in 1887, and how Mother Nature challenged the family with bad storms and even a fire.

Ranch guests can also add other activities through several ranch partners. M&M Overland Coach offers a chuckwagon cook-out and ride on an original 1860s Sidney-Lead-Deadwood stagecoach. You can book a fossil-hunting adventure with a local expert or just spend the evening stargazing. The ranch’s remote location provides a good place to view the night sky.

Chadron

Chadron is about 45 minutes from the ranch, but well worth the drive. The town of 5,400 is home to several popular restaurants, including the Bean Broker Coffee House and Pub, which is known for its stone-fired pizza, hearty sandwiches, and breakfast dishes. (My sister and I went back several times for their delicious pastries.) Owners Paige and Dave Feddersen gutsily opened the restaurant during COVID, but it already has a loyal following.

Nestled among the buttes and canyons of Nebraska’s Pine Ridge, Chadron State Park is the main attraction in the region. As Nebraska’s first state park, it is a popular family vacation destination. The park has cabins for rent, as well as a campground. We saw families fishing, hiking, on the archery range or playing in the pool.

Crawford and Fort Robinson

We spent an afternoon visiting the town of Crawford, population 1,069. It has several unique stores and is home to the Broken Spur, a favorite local restaurant in a beautifully restored historic building. Diners come from more than an hour away for their popular prime rib and steak dinners.

Crawford’s history is closely intertwined with nearby Fort Robinson State Park. Fort Robinson served as a military post from



1874 to 1948. A visit to the Fort Robinson Museum gave us new insight into those tumultuous times. We stopped to visit the monument for Crazy Horse, who had surrendered here but was killed during a brief struggle.

In later years, Fort Robinson had many roles as a cavalry outpost, as the last great gathering of the Sioux, a military dog training center, a World War II POW camp, and more. Today, however, it has been transformed into a popular outdoor recreational park.

In normal times, visitors can go trail riding, take stagecoach rides, and go tubing on the river. Fort Robinson has historic lodges, cabins, and homes that are available for rent, and there is plenty of room to hike, bike, and play outdoors.

Toadstool Geologic Park

Just 30 minutes from Crawford is Toadstool Geologic Park, a region in the Oglala National Grassland that is named for its otherworldly rock formations. Narrow clay pedestals with huge slabs of sandstone on top look like giant toadstool mushrooms. These ancient formations house many fossils or footprints of creatures such as extinct three-toed horses, saber-toothed cats, and camels.

Debbie and I were only a handful of visitors in the park. We took the one-mile trail through the odd-shaped formations. Seeing all the layers, it almost felt like I could see the passage of time.

Other things at the park are a 10,000-year-old bison bonebed and a reconstructed sod house. There is a small campsite onsite.

Northwestern Nebraska is ranching country, and we passed field after field of grazing cattle, bison, and longhorn cattle.

Agate Fossil Beds

Ending our visit, we decided to visit one last park. The Agate Fossil Beds are located 22 miles south of Harrison, population 251, in Sioux County. (Fun fact: 2,000-square-mile Sioux County has a population of only 1,500 people.)

The park's remote location, however, belies its rich fossil record. Agate Fossil Beds Visitor Center is closed, but there is a mobile ranger unit open, and you can explore the grounds. After grabbing a map, we hiked the one-mile Daemonelix Trail, which almost felt like a walk through time. We passed ancient sand dunes and fossil grasslands, but the most interesting thing to see were fossilized spiral beaver burrows. Peering at such a simple, but useful thing from so long ago was moving.

Hopping back in the car, it was time to head home to the city. We took our time exploring the backroads of Nebraska on our unhurried way back home.

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The Hip Strip and Beyond:
Discovering the True Jamaica

TIM JOHNSON

Once, this was Jamaica's most storied stretch of beach. Nicknamed the "Hip Strip," Katharine Hepburn (accompanied by playwright and director Noel Coward) once toiled along this stretch of Gloucester Avenue in Montego Bay in a Singer convertible—one that she shipped to the island herself.

John F. Kennedy and other luminaries vacationed here. The adjacent Doctor's Cave Beach was perhaps the first on the island to attract tourists, all the way back in the 1920s.

And now, walking through a sultry, tropical breeze, palms audible, if not visible, shaking in the inky blackness off to my right, I see that this curving street, today renamed for local, legendary reggae and ska legend Jimmy Cliff, is rising again. The area has seen some tough times, sagging with the development of mega-sized, all-inclusive resorts aimed to keep guests within their walls, swimming and eating and drinking all in one place.

But now, anchored by a Jamaica-centric, distinctly non-all-inclusive hotel (S-Hotel), as well as Usain Bolt's Tracks and Records (a restaurant co-founded by the fastest man on earth), as well as a statuary park dedicated to the island's heroes and an increasing number of new clubs, the Hip Strip is back.

Reopened in June, Jamaica became one of the first Caribbean destinations to welcome visitors again. While travelers from a small handful of states still face restrictions (proof of a negative test taken shortly before arrival is required), it's an island big enough, and diverse enough, to encourage you to roam—and it definitely rewards those that do.

After so many months of lockdown, the joy of finding true connection, real Jamaican destinations—beyond the most popular beaches—is purer than ever. Beyond the Hip Strip, here are a few of our favorites.

The Blue Mountains

Rising to more than 7,000 feet and covering the eastern end of Jamaica, these green peaks—so-named for the blue haze that often hangs around their summits—are full of surprises. Perfect for a drive, tiny two-lane roads wind along soaring ridges and down through lush valleys, with small cafes and other roadside attractions popping up, all along the way.

There's Strawberry Hill, sitting way up, at 3,100 feet, owned by Chris Blackwell, founder of Island Records (the Gold Room here showcases his hardware, gold records awarded to everyone from U2 to Bob Marley). And Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where you can lace up your boots for a hike—some trails meander past natural springs and provide sweeping sea views, but those in for a challenge (and have up to eight hours to devote to it) can actually summit Blue Mountain, a non-technical but still-taxing climb that takes the brave (and the fit) over a 3,000-foot change in elevation.

And, of course, there's coffee. Grown here since 1728, from just six coffee plants transplanted by the British from far-off Java, the unique ecosystem here creates some of the best beans in the world. High-altitude ridges trap the cool trade winds blowing in from the sea, settling moisture onto trees growing in the shade and rooted in dark, volcanic soil. You can tour and taste at places like Craighton Estate, an 18th-century colonial great house where you'll sip some of their premium product while guides explain the process, then hike up, among the coffee trees, to reach a viewpoint overlooking the undulating, fertile farm.

Kingston

Set on the southeast coast of the island and home to more than a million people, Jamaica's capital has gotten its share of bad press over the years, but it's still home to some of the coolest places here. Hire a qualified guide for a day tour, and hit the bustling, super-heated streets. Swing by Tuff Gong Studios, which once turned away Bob Marley, in the early days of his career. Marley was resolute in his conviction that one day he would own it, and his widow completed this wish, turning it into a global hub for reggae recording artists.

And Marley's home in the city, where



The Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

he lived from 1975 to 1981, has become a museum, and feels a bit like a reggae Graceland. A stately 19th-century residence, it still feels like a home, and tours take you past his bedroom and personal recording studio, as well as his lifetime-achievement Grammy and clothes he wore on stage. (It's closed for the moment, but you can still stop by and spot greatness, just over the fence.)

And then, ask your guide to find a few lesser-known spots in the city. One might be Coronation Market, sometimes known as "the stomach of Jamaica," and one of the largest markets in the Caribbean. Selling a colorful array of produce—the fruits of a fertile island—grab a few juicy items and head to a park for a picnic (Kingston has all kinds of green spaces).

Port Antonio

Small, quiet, and home to eco-resorts and open-air markets, this community on the "far" side of the island—beyond the Blue Mountains, in the northeast corner—is a world away from swim-up bars and big hotels. Float on a bamboo raft down the nearby Rio Grande and get a front-row seat to life along one of the island's longest rivers—kids swimming in its dark waters, their parents scrubbing down the laundry—before a simple lunch of shrimp and cod. Visit the Blue Lagoon or local beaches such as Boston Bay and Winnifred Beach, where you can carve out your own piece of paradise, wading into the blue waves, then recharge with jerk chicken or pork, prepared right there, near the water, at little local stands.

And take some time to wander the streets of this small town, taking in its (sometimes tumbledown) colonial architecture, browsing arts and crafts stands, and chatting with friendly people, un-jaded and happy you made the trip here.

Castleton Botanical Garden

Even in a tropical destination, you need your moment of Zen. For that, head to one of the oldest botanical gardens in the Western Hemisphere, established back in 1862, when plants from Bath, in England, were transplanted to this fertile island. Walking these rolling, verdant 15 acres, you can almost forget about the pandemic.

Enjoy a wide variety of endemic and transplanted flora, including some 180 palms and more than 400 other plants.

Nine Mile Village

It's not an easy road, to get there—wind-

ing through hairpin turns, you'll roll through everyday life in Jamaica, a long way from the beach, passing through villages and farmer's fields in Saint Ann Parish, not far from tourist hub Ocho Rios. But again, Bob Marley is the main attraction. The birthplace and childhood home of this island (and global) icon, it's also his final resting place.



The Blue Lagoon, an underground spring fed lagoon, is a popular destination for families and honeymooners.



The Bob Marley Museum.

IF YOU GO

Stay at the stylish, hyper-local S-Hotel, voted the best hotel in the Caribbean. It includes a rooftop bar and seaside pool, right on Doctor's Cave Beach, steps from the Hip Strip. (CrissaHotels.com/s-hotel-jamaica)

A number of airlines connect the United States with both Montego Bay and Kingston from New York, Miami, and other major hubs.

Plan your trip with Visit Jamaica, at VisitJamaica.com

Toronto-based writer Tim Johnson is always traveling, in search of the next great story. Having visited 140 countries across all seven continents, he's tracked lions on foot in Botswana, dug for dinosaur bones in Mongolia, and walked among a half-million penguins on South Georgia Island. He contributes to some of North America's largest publications, including CNN Travel, Bloomberg, and The Globe and Mail.



Reach Falls, Port Antonio.