(warning: most pictures are towards the end ...)

In the spring, a Dutch friend and I talked about touring the Badlands, Yellowstone, and various other wonders of the US West and we did so in June. We went from Minnesota to South Dakota to Wyoming and Montana and back to Minnesota via North Dakota. I drove (almost 5000 miles) and my friend took pictures as I had lost my camera the first day and decided to try without for a few days. I’ll describe various features of some towns, Native American reservations, the cowboys, outlaws, and explorers, and of course the natural splendor of the parks that we visited and the bison, bears, wild horses, pika, and prairie dogs. It is interesting how recent ‘history’ is in this part of the US and how much injustice is so visible. President Obama just visited the Standing Rock Reservation, but he was only the third president to visit ANY reservation in 80 years.

We started on Interstate 90 westward but then saw a sign that looked intriguing: the town of De Smet in South Dakota has the homestead of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author of Little House on the Prairie, and has as its slogan ‘The Wilder Life’, a pun, I guess. To an outsider, the area is agricultural and not so wild, with lots of shiny silos and rolling fields. Homesteads in this area started after 1862, cost $18, and were 160 acres. Homesteading functioned as an incentive to get people to settle the ‘empty’ west and fulfill the manifest destiny. In the southwestern part of the state, the landscape becomes more rugged, with the Badlands and the Black Hills.

The name De Smet returned a number of times during the trip, in Idaho and Montana, as did names such as Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Calamity Jane, Wild Bill, Sacagawea, and Lewis & Clark, for different reasons. Pierre-Jean De Smet (1801-1873) was a Flemish Jesuit missionary and explorer, who traveled all across the US (and many times across the Atlantic), set up missions, did fundraising, and negotiated various treaties between the US and Native Americans, e.g. the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 that gave the Sioux the Black Hills (for as long as it lasted, i.e. till the gold rush).
De Smet may never actually have been in the place named after him (Ingalls homestead docent guide p.c. and wiki information) but his pictures are in many museums all over, for instance, in the St. Ignatius Mission on the Flathead Reservation and as a historic marker on a road in Eastern Idaho. The Flathead Reservation is the home of the Confederated Salish, i.e. S奎利*, and Kootenai, i.e. Ktwoza, tribes (see http://tribalnations.mt.gov/csks.asp). Road signs are bilingual and the area seems somewhat more prosperous than other reservation areas but I have no data to back that up and we didn’t visit their college in Pablo, MT to get more information.

De Smet died in 1873 before the battle of Little Bighorn and the Massacre on Pine Ridge in South Dakota. At some point after the 1868 treaty, Sitting Bull of the Oglala Lakota had a vision that his warriors could defeat the white man. He attracted 10,000 people from various tribes to a particular location. The US Cavalry commander George Custer ‘came across’ this camp and attacked but his troops of around 400 were outnumbered and many died, including Custer, on 25 (and 26) June 1876 in the Battle of Little Big Horn. Much puzzles me about this battle that I haven’t read up enough on, e.g. the Battle of Rosebud that happened just prior to that of Little Bighorn on 17 June. On the Indian side, it was led by Crazy Horse and, since Custer was involved in it, the Rosebud Battle should have given him a clue about the force he was dealing with. Seeing the Battleground of Little Bighorn, south of Billings and now part of the Crow Reservation, was very interesting (and sad). The area isn’t so big and there are few trees, so, although Custer must have known that he was outnumbered, he still attacked.
The defeat at Little Bighorn is still sometimes called ‘Custer’s Last Stand’, as if he was the one defending himself! It is the last victory of the native people over the US military but the victory led to retaliations against them, in particular a continued forced return of the native peoples to the reservations where they had to rely on government subsidies and of course to the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. The start of this massacre is somewhat mysterious. The following is a description that I have seen in other sources as well: “It was during this time that news spread among the reservations of a Paiute prophet named Wovoka, founder of the Ghost Dance religion. He had a vision that the Christian Messiah, Jesus Christ, had returned to earth in the form of a Native American. According to Wovoka, the Messiah would raise all the Native American believers above the earth. During this time the white man would disappear from Native lands, the buffalo herds and all the other animals would return in abundance, and the ghosts of their ancestors would return to earth — hence the word "Ghost" in Ghost Dance " (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wounded_Knee_Massacre). The massacre is said to have started when some tribes sought refuge on the Lakota reservation, after Sitting Bull was killed, and performed a ghost dance. I have to (re)read some books on this topic.

The current holocaust museum at Wounded Knee (see above picture) is a sad round building with slogans from the seventies: “The Indian Wars are not over” and much about AIM, again from an earlier time. The museum/commemoration site had just reopened when we were there in June. Leonard Peltier was of course the first item of discussion with the custodian. It is hard to travel anywhere in this area without being confronted every day with the plight of contemporary Native Americans and their history. For instance, Montana is said to have 9% First Peoples and the unemployment is said to be over 50% (http://www.montana.edu/wwwextec/countydata/Crow.pdf). On the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, it is said that unemployment is 80%. The reservations we crossed were Lower Brule (Lakota), Pine Ridge (Oglala Lakota), Wind River (Shoshone and Arapaho), Flathead (Salish, Pend d’Oreille, Kootenai), Blackfeet (Piegan Blackfoot), and Crow (Crow).

The Black Hills house Mount Rushmore NP and Crazy Horse Memorial park, nice complements of each other. Teddy Roosevelt, the third in the below picture, is greatly beloved in the West for his work on preservation of natural resources and really should be up there! The others are Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. The Memorial to Crazy Horse will have Crazy Horse on a horse with stretched out arm. Crazy Horse, mentioned above in connection with some battles, was stabbed to death in 1877 by a soldier while at an army camp. There are also interesting beer and wine breweries, e.g. red ass rhubarb wine.
I love petroglyphs and pictographs but had not thought of them before this particular trip. We stumbled upon one while trying to find some bighorn sheep. The one below to the left is in the pecked Dinwoody tradition and is one we found east of Dubois, Wyoming; the other is in the incised/painted manner and this example of a shield-bearer is from southeastern Montana. The huge area we visited has these two main traditions that are mainly found in separate areas (according to Francis & Loendorf 2002: 188-9 Utah UP). The Dinwoody tradition lasted 3000 years and, most likely, has shamanistic relevance; the incised/painted tradition was more widespread and non-shamanistic (idem, 195). Francis & Loendorf therefore suggest two main religious traditions.

Some of the events in the pictographs are reminiscent of paintings on hides and on ledger paper. The latter kind wasn’t around as much as I was expecting, but contemporary native art building on traditional motifs can be seen in many of the Plains museums, e.g. in the Red Cloud
Heritage Center in Pine Ridge, SD and in the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning on the Blackfeet Reservation. The below shows a ledger painting on the left by Sitting Bull in 1882, drawing himself in a battle with the Crow Indians and a contemporary painting of an Oglala artist I like is shown on the right.

Sitting Crow, 1882, pencil on ledger
(http://collections.si.edu/)

Roger Broer, Keeper of the Darkness, 1990s?

The bison, also technically erroneously referred to as buffalo, has made a remarkable comeback (see timeline http://www.fws.gov/bisonrange/timeline.htm). It was hunted by native peoples (e.g. using jumps such as in Ulm, MT, close to Great Falls) but especially by white hunters in the 1870s when 5000 are estimated to have been killed each day. Now, there are quite a few in the parks and their eyes are amazingly big and it is wonderful to drive right next to them as they often stand in the middle of the road. Wild horses did the same and there were bear (far away) and longhorns (not so far) and of course prairie dogs and marmots and various other smaller creatures. We saw a white buffalo in Jamestown from a distance; they are considered sacred and brought the ceremonial (peace) pipe.

Bison in Roosevelt NP

Wild horses in Roosevelt NP
The sweet clover was in bloom everywhere and it smelled lovely and colored the landscape yellow. Lots of other spring flowers, but also trees that were barely out, and quite substantial snow in Yellowstone!

The Tetons, Yellowstone, Glacier, and Roosevelt have amazing scenery and some pictures follow below. Devil’s Tower is said to have been created by the raising of a rock to protect some girls from a bear which scratched the rock; the girls became stars in the sky.
Driving through this country, there is rodeo everywhere and casinos too; billboards tell the gambler where to call for help. One finds mention of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark for different reasons and the woman, Sacagawea, who helped them from the middle of North Dakota to Yellowstone has statues and hotel names everywhere. Lewis and Clark encountered many challenges, one of them was at Great Falls, now dammed up!
Towns were interesting too. I mentioned De Smet early on. We had a look at Wall, Scenic, Deadwood, all in South Dakota, Buffalo, Cody, and Dubois in Wyoming, Island Park in Idaho, Three Forks, Butte, Missoula, Kalispell, Hungry Horse, and Billings in Montana, Medora, Bismarck, and Fargo in North Dakota, and had pie in Brandon, Minnesota.

Of these, only Wall is a tourist trap with Wall Drug; it is close to the Badlands, however, and handy. Scenic is a semi-deserted town just south of the Badlands that had been for sale for less than $800,000 and that was sold to a Philippine church. Intriguing what this church will do with it. We went to a sad trading post that typed us as Germans but that had an adorable dog. Deadwood is all about Crazy Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane who are buried here (and sadly about Kevin Costner). Calamity Jane’s autobiography is available from Gutenberg.
Buffalo, Wyoming has the Occidental Hotel that is haunted and really gorgeous, with “131 years of hospitality”. Cody was founded by THE Buffalo Bill Cody. We had dinner at the Irma Hotel with a shooting show afterwards and that was so much fun! We also made it to Old Trail Town where cabins used by Old West outlaws such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid have been relocated. Many great characters find a resting ground here, e.g. Jeremiah ‘Liver Eatin’ Johnston and Belle Drewry. We missed the Heart Mountain Interpretative Center (http://www.heartmountain.org) where Japanese and Japanese American were confined during World War II and the Buffalo Bill Dam (http://www.bbdvc.com): next time! Dubois was lovely – the petroglyphs were mentioned above – and Island Park in Idaho was interesting with a lovely restaurant and a woman from Belgium who had gotten hooked on snowmobiling and stayed.

The Irma Hotel (picture from http://www.irmahotel.com)

Robert Redford helping to rebury Jeremia
http://www.tripadvisor.nl

Bozeman and Belgrade were full, motel-wise, so we ended up in Three Forks, where Lewis and Clark are honored with an excellent motel and Sacagawea with a very fancy historic hotel with great food. We then had to stop in Butte for an oil change. It is a mining town on a hill and we went to the no longer functional Berkeley Pit of the copper mine and tried to see the gigantic statue of the Holy Mary very far up the hill. Missoula is a university town with confusing directions so we didn’t do much there. Kalispell has good coffee and breakfasts and an interesting main street. Hungry Horse has huckleberry pies, which we missed, and Billings is a gateway. Moving to North Dakota, we had lunch in Medora and were then in Bismarck. It has the Capitol Building and a deserted Main Street. Fargo has the Plains Art Museum which is impressive/inspiring/world-class. There were a few exhibits, e.g. Sandra Menefee Taylor’s Heart/Land.

This was an amazing trip with lots to explore. For instance, there are a lot of issues affecting the National Parks, e.g. oil drilling and trains transporting oil (see Bakken vs Badlands in the Billings Gazette for the former and the one in OnEarth for the latter) and of course the residents of these states. Good to get a glimpse of another part of the US.