

Finding Theodore Roosevelt in Medora

A travel report by Pip van der Zanden, August 2023.

When I was making my plans for the summer of 2023, I did not expect that I would be spending a week in the Middle of Nowhere, North Dakota. I was happily surprised to learn about my nomination for the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award and did not expect much in terms of a possible victory. Sure, I was proud of my MA thesis and all the hard work I had put into it, but I knew that the standards were high and that the work of the other nominees was phenomenal as well. Despite that, I couldn't help Googling the town of Medora. One of the first things that comes up is its population: a whopping number of 117 in 2021, followed by its proximity to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I did not know what to expect, but looking back at my journey now, there was no way that Google could have prepared me for it.

After a long, exhausting journey, I arrived in Bismarck, the capital of North Dakota, on August 27. The tiny airport was easily the smallest I had ever visited and I had no issues locating my driver, Eddie. He led me to his car, where we were awaited by a tall guy dressed completely in black, including a black cowboy hat, which he tipped in greeting. It was at this moment that I realized that I was about to step into a completely different world. The drive from Bismarck to Medora was another two hours, but it flew by as Eddie and Curtis, the cowboy, told me stories about the history of the area and the people of Medora. Most of the scenery along the highway was flat farmland, with some oil rigs and large billboards as the only variation. I was therefore slightly confused when Eddie announced that behind the next bend in the road, we would see the cliffs of what was called the Painted Canyons. Cliffs? There were barely any hills! But sure enough, around the bend I was first introduced to the rugged beauty of the Badlands.

The area of North Dakota in which Medora is located is unlike any place I had ever seen. It looks like someone has taken a big spoon and has scooped out big chunks of the land in some places, leaving a landscape consisting of valleys and peaks that seem to jut out of the ground. During my trip, I had the privilege to be driven around these buttes, hike, or even ride a horse across the cliffs. In the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, I saw millions of prairie dogs, three herds of bison, and even a few groups of wild horses. The park itself consists of wide, scenic views of the Badlands, with buttes, cliffs, and canyons as far as the eye can see, and the Little Missouri River snaking through. I took a thousand pictures, some of which I have attached to this report, but none of them were able to capture how eye-wateringly beautiful the Badlands really are.



As stunned as I was by the nature surrounding Medora, I was even more surprised by the people living and working there. I was prepared for an incredibly small, historic town with a population of 117. What I was not prepared for, however, was how much the town comes to life in the summer. When I first arrived at the hotel, I was welcomed by Clarence Sitter, the COO of the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, and my main host for the week. He explained to me that that small population count was based on those who live in Medora year-round, even during the extremely harsh winters. During the summer, however, the town fills up with seasonal workers, performers, and volunteers from all over the world. During this trip, I met people from Fargo, North Dakota and Fort Collins, Colorado, but also people from South Africa, Ukraine, and Germany. One of my favorite activities became asking people where they were from, and what led them to Medora. Their answers to both questions varied, but the one thing that stayed consistent was how incredibly nice and welcoming everyone was.

The North Dakotan kindness revealed itself to me on my first full day in Medora. Clarence had other business to take care of that day, so I was going to be horseback riding with Jewel, the



office manager of TRMF. We got on like a house on fire, which was a good thing considering Jewel's horse insisted on walking face-to-butt with my horse. Apparently, Mufasa and Blitzen were best friends. After a beautiful trail ride, we walked back to Jewel's truck, which she hadn't locked. Jewel explained to me that most people in North Dakota don't lock their cars, as it's unlikely someone will steal them. Some people even leave their key in the ignition! After that, we spent some time exploring the historical center of Medora, which is just a few streets to be honest, and some of the buildings looked like a movie set. We were unable to do one of the activities that was on the schedule, but that didn't matter, as we just walked around town and started conversations with people. At the end of that morning, there were already three people who had asked if I could send them my thesis. After lunch, Jewel and I drove up to the farm where Theodore Roosevelt's famous Maltese Cross Ranch had originally been located. She then dropped me back off at the

center of town, where I had some time for myself to explore it further and do most of my gift shopping. My evening schedule consisted of a pizza dinner with Clarence and his adorable 7-year-old daughter, and a magic show, which was surprisingly impressive.

The next day I spent a full day at the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. I was to be driven around the park by Glen, a wonderful older gentleman who spends his summers in Medora and

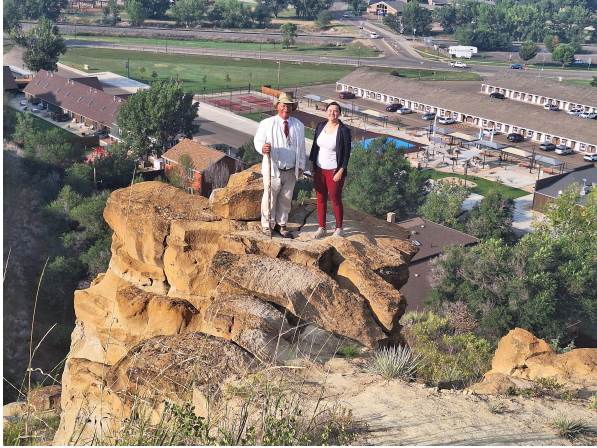
his winters in Phoenix, Arizona and works for the Theodore Roosevelt Library. We went to the visitor center first, where we watched an interesting video on the history and the animals of the national park. Behind the center, the actual cabin from the Maltese Cross Ranch had been reassembled.

Apparently, when Roosevelt became president, the cabin became a bit of a curiosity that toured the country and was disassembled and reassembled numerous times. After our visit to the cabin, Glen and I drove around the park, stopping every now and then to take a short hike to some beautiful spots. Glen even took me to a more remote part of the park, where we hiked more than two miles to find the petrified forest, which was a collection of tree fossils laying around. It is in places like the petrified forest that you can really feel how old the earth is, and it was very impressive. That evening, after dinner, Clarence was supposed to take me to a music show, but it was canceled. This is no problem in Medora, however, because in no time Clarence and I had been invited into the home of the CEO of the Medora Foundation. Randy Hatzenbuhler showed



us around the place, which had previously belonged to Harold Shafer, the millionaire responsible for reviving the town of Medora. He regaled us with stories about Shafer's life and read an excerpt from a book on Theodore Roosevelt's time out West. Despite some canceled plans, I had a wonderful evening.

The following day, my schedule was packed. My first activity of the day was a "hike with Theodore Roosevelt". I didn't know what to expect at first, but this turned out to be one of my favorite activities of the trip. At the meeting point, I was approached by a man who did look a lot like Teddy, but turned out to be Joe Wiegand, perhaps the best Theodore Roosevelt impersonator in the U.S. I was lucky enough to meet him as Joe, however, and I do consider myself lucky as he was very kind, funny, and knowledgeable about everything T.R. We took a short hike around the town butte, along with two volunteers who decided to tag along, as he told us story upon story about the former president. Joe then took me to see the Chateau de Mores, which was the



house that belonged to the Marquis de Mores, the man who founded Medora and named it after his wife. The people of Medora are very proud of its history, and the Marquis and his wife had been recurring characters in many stories already. Joe unfortunately had to leave after the Chateau, but Clarence took over and drove me to the Cowboy Hall of Fame, a museum featuring the history of horse culture in the West. We then grabbed some lunch and paid a visit to Glen at the office of the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, which is in development in Medora and is hoping to open

its doors in 2026. Glen told us all about the project and the plans they had for it. After that, Clarence and I drove up to the building site and I got an impression of how beautiful the library is going to be.

Wednesday evening deserves its own paragraph. After the library, Clarence and I went to a place called Point-to-Point Park, which is a large playground with a swimming pool, lazy river, zipline and minigolf track. We skipped the pool, as it was closed on Wednesdays, but we did enjoy a game of minigolf (which I lost spectacularly), went down the zipline, and had a cone of shaved ice in the shade. After playing around there, we drove back up the butte where the library was being built, as it was also home to the Medora Musical and the Pitchfork Steak Fondue. The latter is a steak dinner, where chefs dressed as cowboys dunk large pieces of New York strip steak skewered onto pitchforks into large barrels of hot oil. What comes out is a crunchy, slightly greasy, but delicious steak, which you can enjoy with a bunch of different sides. After this dinner it was time for the musical. You have to understand, I had spent three days in Medora already at this point, and every new person I met asked me if I had seen the musical yet, so my anticipation was very high at this point. The theater itself was breathtaking, with the rows of seats going down the side of the butte and the stage overlooking spectacular views of the Badlands. Then it was time for the musical to start, and I knew I was not going to be disappointed when the hosts pulled up on stage in a 4x4 truck. The evening, however, did not go as expected because halfway through the show, it was announced that a thunderstorm was getting dangerously close. Everyone quickly, but safely, returned to their cars and I instead ended the evening on Clarence's front porch with his oldest daughter (17), watching the lightning.

On Thursday, I was picked up by Mike Cullinane for a visit to Dickinson University. This is the closest university to Medora and home to the Theodore Roosevelt Center, a small but passionate group of researchers and archivists who run a collection of primary sources on Theodore Roosevelt. I hadn't realized quite how foreign Medora had felt to me, until I stepped into that university environment, and I felt a sense of familiarity wash over me. This feeling was

exacerbated by Mike's sense of humor, with him being from New Jersey and living in Ireland most of the time, was a bit closer to the Dutch directness that I was used to. The first point on my agenda was auditing a class, where several students gave presentations on Teddy Roosevelt's early life. After that, it was my turn to present to a large group of students and faculty members at the D.S.U. Global Table Event, a biweekly event where someone gives a talk about a foreign country, and the students can listen and ask questions while enjoying a snack from that country. The snack served at my talk on the Netherlands was, of course, Belgian waffles. After my presentation, which had a surprisingly high turnout, I met with the staff of the Theodore Roosevelt Center and they showed me around their archives. The most impressive part of their collection was a room designed to look like a scaled replica of Roosevelt's office, where researchers can sit, read a book, and even listen to music on a cylinder phonograph. After lunch with the staff of TRC, the digital collections specialist William took me to the local museum, which was an interesting mix of dinosaur fossils and local history. My evening was quiet, which was a welcome change, as I needed some time to process everything I had seen so far. I had dinner by myself and then climbed to the top of the town butte to watch the sunset.

Friday was my final full day in Medora, and consisted of a mix of miscellaneous activities. Clarence and I started out with a beautiful hike on a nearby trail, which lasted about an hour. We worked up quite an appetite, which was a good thing, considering our next activity was the Gospel Brunch. This is a brunch with fantastic food (I recommend the caramel rolls) followed by great live gospel music. After the brunch, Clarence and I visited the Bully Pulpit Golf Course, where I got to drive a golf cart, and the Harold Shafer Heritage



Center, which is a museum about the man who revived Medora, and then it was time for the Teddy Roosevelt Show. It was strange to see Joe as Teddy, after having met the man behind the president, but his show was incredibly entertaining. He put me on the spot by introducing me to the rest of the audience, but made up for it by tossing me an adorable teddy bear at the end of the show, which he had pulled out of his top hat. Next on the program was a dinner at the Roughrider Hotel with a few local historians. Here, I enjoyed good company, great conversations, and possibly the largest steak I have ever eaten. We ended the evening by returning to the musical, which I was able to enjoy fully without being interrupted by lightning this time.

This report features the official activities that were organized so kindly by the TRMF for me, but I will carry many more memories with me from this trip. What will stay with me the most may not be every excursion or museum, but the kindness and the hospitality of the people of Medora. I would probably not have visited this place if I had not won the award, but now I hope to return one day, so I can see the completed library and spend some more time in the Badlands.