

So you have put the Sandhills Journey National Scenic Byway, 272 miles of Nebraska Highway 2 in your travel plans. Bits and pieces can be seen in a day or two, but for the whole experience one would need 4 nights, five days minimum.

Gazing, Grazing in GI. (Weekend escape – 1 overnight)

At our eastern portal, Grand Island, Nebraska, one can headquarter at the Quality Inn and Conference Center just off I-80. A whole day or 2 can be spent just in this area alone. Grand Island is only one and one-half hours west from Lincoln, or two and a half from Omaha so a week-end getaway is manageable.

From the motel, travel on I-80 west to Alda, visiting Crane Trust and Nature Center, 9325 S Alda Rd , I-80 exit #305. (308-382-1820) March is the main month to view the cranes in person. Reservations for blinds during the peak season needs to be made months in advance. Other times of the year, one can hear them, see photos of them and learn about them and other wildlife, such as the American bison grazing on the grass, while at the center. Plan on at least one hour here.

From Alda, back track east to Grand Island. Travel on Tom Osborne Expressway to Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer (one of the largest living history museums in the nation). 3133 W U.S. Hwy 34. (308-385-5316). Plan on two hours minimum here to explore the main building, see the earth lodge, the boyhood home of famous actor Henry Fonda and Railroad town, where depending on the day and time, locals dressed in period costumes show their blacksmithing or millinery (hat making) skills.

When leaving Stuhr, travel east to Locust Street , turn north on Locust and keep going until you see the Fonner Park turn at the intersection of State Fair Boulevard and South Locust. Enter here, where the Nebraska State Fair headquarters for 10 days end of August to Labor Day is held. When the state fair relocated from Lincoln, the board members spared no expense to make the buildings and grounds for livestock shows and other events some of the best in the nation. National livestock shows are held here every summer as well as AK-SAR-BEN livestock show and rodeo shortly after the State Fair is completed. AK-SAR-BEN (Nebraska spelled backwards) left Omaha a few years ago as no place to expand was left. Scan other lodging choices, but book motel early if you plan on coming and staying for the fair or AK-SAR-BEN. Grab fun food while at the fair, or on the way or just snack saving yourself for what we refer to as ‘supper’, last meal of the day. No matter the season, seeing the Raising Nebraska Inside pavilion is a must stop while at Fonner Park. Opened Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, and 1 p.m. to 4:00 or other times by calling 308-385-3967. Here one can interact with all aspects of Nebraska agriculture, from beef to bees, and even ride in a combine simulator during harvest. Go through the doors and view Raising Nebraska Outside, actual crops grown here during the summer watered by a smaller version of a center pivot that was seen actual size inside; meander on the bricks that depict several of Nebraska’s rivers – such as the Platte and Niobrara.

Leaving Fonner Park, continue to travel north on Locust to downtown Grand Island. Get out and exercise your senses while at Studio K Art Gallery, 112 W 3rd St or the Chocolate Bar Coffee Shop, 116 W 3rd, (308-675-0664) where you can enjoy dessert before the main course at Kinkaider Brewery ,316 N Pine St. (308-384-3655). Besides great food, one can sample some of the brews manufactured from the home location of Kinkaider Brewery at Broken Bow, another community on the expanded tour on the Sandhills Journey National Scenic Byway. While walking, you are invited to ‘be the body’ of the myriad of butterflies painted on the buildings in downtown GI – great photo opps! The owner of Studio K was the artist.

Other POI to consider – Google them for location and times of operation

Island Oasis Water Park - Prairie Pride Brewing Co - Heartland Public Shooting Park (Shooting Range & Archery)

Hornaday Factory Tour Public parks and golf courses

Travel 16 miles south from motel on the Tom Osborne Expressway and visit Hastings Museum, Planetarium and Theatre – 1330 N. Burlington Avenue, Hastings, Ne (402-461-2399) – three floors of ‘Wow’ as stated on their website – www.hastingsmuseum.org. An IMAX theatre will make you feel like you are on the set!

Now that you have seen the largest city and area attractions on our byway – Head ‘em west!