

#23 CASPER, WYOMING

Wild landscapes yield to
An outpost of sturdy poise
The cowboy's grown up

Lat: 42.8487° N

Lon: 106.3251° W

Elevation: 5,150 feet

Miles Traveled: 2,090

Day five started with a chilly high plains sunrise; we chatted with Ginny a bit more, then made our way back down the slanted wooden steps, leaving another excellent Airbnb experience in the rearview. Our first destination was Casper, named not for a friendly ghost but for the former military outpost Fort Caspar. This, in turn, had been

named for US Army Officer Caspar Collins, who perished in an 1865 battle against the Cheyenne and Lakota tribes. With a population of 55,000 – exactly half of Manchester's and about 1/10 of Wyoming's – Casper was by far the largest city we'd seen since Madison, two days and 1,000 miles ago. Several coffee-colored 5-10 story buildings emerged as we approached downtown from the east.



We discovered a parking space and enjoyed a few minutes' stroll in an uncrowded but surprisingly handsome area near the intersection of Center and 2nd Streets. The temperature was an exceedingly pleasant 65 degrees. We had only been in Casper for five minutes, and it struck me how dissimilar this was from any city back east. You know you're not in New Hampshire any more when billboards are



emblazoned with such phrases as 'Ranch Outfitters'. The wide streets we rambled upon were clean, well-kept, and walkable, but there was a certain clumsiness to a city of this size sprung forth from millions of acres of grasslands. Arriving here was like catching a former cowboy sheepishly headed off to work in a striped business suit. The Wild West with a thin façade of civility. A small, remote outpost grown up.

As usual, our time in downtown Casper was very limited. Upon starting the trip, an hour or less in a new city seemed dreadfully inadequate, and maybe it was. By now though, lamenting limited time at each stop had evolved into something like acceptance. After all, when is time ever sufficient to pursue our passions? One could spend a month in [insert place here] and not begin to pry open its chest of treasures. Who will ever have the resources to give destinations their proper due? I've lived nearly my whole life in New Hampshire, a broom closet in the castle that is the US, yet I am far from an expert on its diminutive confines.

To fully appreciate the world's overwhelming wonders we'd need immortality, and where would the challenge be in that? Maybe the key is to cherish 30 minutes as much as 30 years; to grasp life as a collection of moments, ordinary and astounding. To value their sweetness before they melt away.



We motored uphill to a diversion I had come across when researching the trip: The National Historic Trails Interpretive Center. Blustery winds scratched across the plain to greet us as we examined replicas of a tepee, covered wagon, and log cabin. As I scanned the beautiful, open grounds of the Museum, I nearly stepped on a wee cactus, the only one we would see in well over 3,000 miles on the 43rd parallel. An earth-tone lizard scurried across the pathway to welcome us in.

The museum was excellent, focusing on four main trails that millions of young Americans learned about in their musty, outdated schoolbooks, including the Oregon Trail and Pony Express. During our time there, we were approached by a burly, mustachioed man asking where we were headed. When I answered 'Grand Teton National Park,' he somberly suggested we check the Wyoming DOT website for road conditions, as flooding had been experienced along some of the main roads northwest of here. When we headed back to the car, we were relieved to find that there were no major closures. Detours in this part of the country could mean adding 100+ miles to our already packed journey.



Taken altogether, Casper had been a welcome, urban-ish respite from the dozens of hours of grainy remoteness. While we still had nearly 5 more hours of driving to reach the National Park, we were anticipating the most major topographical change of the entire trip. Things would be looking up.