

## **A week in Medora, North Dakota**

North Dakota? Why there? This is the question I often got when telling friends and family about spending part of my summer in Medora, North Dakota. And I can't blame them. Little did I know about this beautiful state in the north until I won the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award. This came as a total surprise to me. Therefore it was even more special that a few weeks after winning the prize I took off to a place some people know as 'flyover country', but to me was one of the most special places I have ever been.

### **The town Medora**

I took off to Bismarck airport on Sunday July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019 in a small plane from Minneapolis. Bismarck is the capital of North Dakota. It made me a little concerned at first that this plane did not have any life vests. Only after a closer look at the map I realized a life vest would not help much when flying to Bismarck. Soon after arriving in Bismarck airport I was discovered by Eddie. Eddie is the driver of the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation (TRMF) who brought me from Bismarck airport to Medora, the town I was going to spend the next week. The drive from Bismarck to Medora takes about two and a half hours on a straight highway. It is beautiful to see the landscape changes along the way. Around Bismarck the landscape is flat, similar to home. Towards the west more hills arise and right before arriving in Medora the landscape changes to the 'badlands', eroded clay rocks. It is hard to describe in words what the badlands look like, so please see the pictures attached.



The drive through the beautiful landscape gave me plenty of time to fully understand what organization was hosting me and why they did so. The TRMF is a non-profit formed by a gift from Harold Schafer, a successful businessman. The goal of the foundation is to save the history of the town of Medora and the badlands for generations to come. With the efforts of the Foundation the town of Medora is beautifully maintained and full of workers and volunteers that bring the goals of the foundation in to practice. The foundation has connections with the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies in Middelburg, both named after (one of the) Roosevelts. And so besides all the Foundation's work to make Medora a great place for visitors, they also host the Dutch TRAHA winner.

When we arrived in Medora, Eddie gave me a short tour by car through the town. Soon after I met Colleen Reinhardt. Colleen is the woman who had organized this entire week for me. We were both very excited to



finally meet, even though she had hoped to give me the first tour of the town everybody is so proud of. In the second tour of Medora given by Colleen we passed every building in town and Colleen told me about the people that lived in Medora including what their role was in the community. Medora is not bigger than a few streets and only over a hundred people live in Medora year round. Other people in the street are mainly tourists from North Dakota or surrounding states, volunteers and summer workers for the Foundation. Many buildings and most attractions are owned by the Foundation. It was striking how friendly and relaxed the people in Medora are. It was also quite surprising how most cars were very large but at the

same time drove so slow through the peaceful town. Another noticeable thing is that I was often recognized in the streets as the Dutch award winner. Quite a few people knew my name or walked up to me to say they had read (the summary of) my thesis. This almost made me feel like a celebrity in Medora.

At the start of the week Colleen handed me two A4s with the schedule of the coming week. Everything that could possibly be done in Medora was on this schedule. And it was incredible how many people were involved to accomplish all this. I got two personal tours throughout the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, a backstage visit at the Medora musical, a morning with a Teddy Roosevelt impersonator/reprisor, a visit to Lake Sakakawea and fort Mandan, a gospel brunch, a talent show, a hike with Randy Hatzenbuehler, the CEO from the Medora Foundation himself, and much more.

### **The Medora musical**

The main attraction of the week was without doubt the Medora Musical. This musical has been around for over fifty years and over four million people have seen it. The Medora Musical takes place in an open-air amphitheater right in the badlands. Visitors of the musical often start their evening with dinner at the Pitchfork Fondue. In this restaurant pieces of steak are stuck per 8 on a pitchfork. Several pitchforks go into a huge hot oil bath to deep-fry the steaks. It tastes great and the view overlooking Medora makes it even better. From the Fondue people can take an escalator down to the outdoor musical theater. Many people I met in Medora came from other towns or surrounding states and visit Medora once every year to see this musical. Quite often I chatted with people who were taking their children to the musical as they used to do the same with their parents when they were young.

The Medora musical is about the emergence of the town and its values. A central theme was the importance of the fight for freedom. Before the national anthem played, war veterans in the crowd were asked to stand up to be thanked for their service, in particular for protecting the freedom of America. It was striking how many veterans were present in a family musical crowd and that a great majority of them was under 40 years old. The performance was wonderful. The western music and dancing was amazing and horses were performing live on

stage. The stage resembled the landmark buildings in Medora town. It was beautiful to see that during the show the buildings on stage could move away so the sunset over the badlands became the stage. The musical ended with a big American flag projected on the badlands while fireworks light up the sky. This was a beautiful evening and a highlight of an incredible week!

### **A changing landscape**

Just as beautiful as the town and its people is the landscape surrounding Medora, the badlands. I have heard several theories on why this land is called 'bad land', but when seeing the rough landscape it is easy to understand that this land is not good for travelling or farming. A great part of the badlands are part of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. The park is very easy to visit by car. Well maintained roads cross the park and along the way are several short trails to hike and take a closer look at certain areas of the park. I have spotted many animals. I have seen wild horses, a bison, hundreds of prairie dogs, a fox and I think I have never jumped higher in my life when I heard a rattlesnake (although it might have been a bug that made a similar noise). My favorite part of the park was the northern unit. At one of the highest points in the area was a beautiful viewpoint that gave an incredible view over the Little Missouri River meandering through the badlands. This was absolutely amazing.

But the landscape outside the national park is changing. I visited Fort Mandan, a replica fort built by the Lewis and Clark expedition for wintering over when exploring the west in 1804. The people on this expedition were courageous enough to leave all that was known to follow the Missouri river and discover completely new land where native tribes resided. Much of this land later became farmland (North Dakota's famous wheat fields). I visited the Garrison Dam. This dam is built in the Missouri river to regulate the water flow and generate electric power. This dam created Lake Sakakawea, a massive lake in North Dakota. At the same time the lake created by the dam flooded a great part of the land of the Three Affiliated Tribes and forced them to relocate and give up their tradition way of life.

More recent also part of the scenic farmland is changing in North Dakota. After the discovery of the oil fracking process, North Dakota has become the fastest growing oil producing state. While the rest of the world was facing a crisis in 2008, the North Dakota economy was booming. Small towns stopped losing population, the unemployment is among the lowest in the US and the state income has increased dramatically. Oil towns are now opening schools instead of closing schools. The oil industry is making North Dakota rich. At the same time the oil economy is changing the landscape. Across the land oil rigs are popping up. Longer trains than I had ever seen pass Medora to transport the oil. And the inflow of people also brings new challenges. The building of the Dakota Access pipeline to transport the oil caused big protests



because environmental concerns, especially since it passes the Standing Rock Sioux tribe reservation and sacred lands. Oil is a topic that occupied many people I met. Most felt they greatly benefited from the economic boom but at the same time people are concerned about the rapid changes they see in the land and the community they are so proud of. And so when I left North Dakota I felt I was leaving in the middle of a story, curious about the end and longing to come back.

### **Thank you**

Medora is a truly hidden gem. The people I met in Medora were so warm-hearted and kind. I can only recommend others to go off the beaten track and spend some time here. I am very grateful to the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies and all sponsors for making this possible. I also want to thank all the people in Medora that made this trip so special to me and I cannot thank Colleen Reinhardt and Leontien Joosse enough for organizing this. Medora is a place I would otherwise probably not have heard of, but it is an incredible place to be. Thank you.

**Queeny van der Spek**

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