

Nebraska Geographic

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Beat Summer Heat with Cool Indoor Travel Experiences

This time of year, when summer heat has many of us sequestered indoors, the thought of spending a sweltering day at the zoo, walking trails in a humid state park, or in any way being under the baking sun may not sound particularly inviting. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy being outside year-round. But come mid to late summer when the humidity is high and even the weatherman is tired of his 100-degree forecasts, sometimes I just want to spend a day or two indoors. That doesn't mean you will find me lounging on the living room couch.

There are many quality travel destinations in Nebraska where visitors can spend hours and hours entertained while exploring inside the comfort of an air-conditioned attraction.

Like a lot of things in Nebraska, when it was first proposed, the idea of having a museum spanning over Interstate 80 had its detractors, doubters, and naysayers. Twenty-four years after opening perhaps it still does. But today, The Archway near Kearney welcomes 60,000 travelers each year to this tribute to the generations of travelers who left, blood, sweat, and tears along the Great Platte River Road. When you walk in, you're likely to be greeted by a woman dressed as an Oregon Trail pioneer, or perhaps a man portraying a grizzled fur trader right out of the 1870s. From there, step onto the escalator for a two-story ride up to the historical experience beginning with the trials and tribulations of the many pioneer trails that passed this very spot long before I-80 or automobiles were a thing. This sensory experience includes a fast-moving prairie thunderstorm.

The Archway adventure includes some history of the early Native Americans who hunted and traded in the Platte River Valley, and also the stories of more modern travelers traversing America on the nearby Lincoln Highway. It has a great gift shop and bookstore, and best of all, the Archway is air conditioned, and so cool.

In McCook, the Museum of the High Plains has lots of things that are seen in Nebraska museums. There's military memorabilia, books and archives, antique furnishings, pioneer tools, Native American artifacts, and fossils to name a few. But this southwest Nebraska museum has one artifact that you aren't going to see anywhere else in this state **OR ON THIS PLANET!**

In 1884, the *Nebraska State Journal* reported that Benkelman-area rancher John Ellis and his hired hands heard a roar overhead and looked up to see a blazing fireball crash to the ground and skid into a canyon. The story continued that the men saw cogs and gears strewn about in the charred grass, and a puddle of molten sand where the fireball, a craft of some kind, burned. One cowboy peered over the canyon rim and was blinded as his eyebrows were singed. A greenish, jelly-like substance covered the ground before evaporating.

Is the large chunk of transparent, greenish glass-like material in the museum's collection really a remnant of that UFO encounter from before the time of commercial air travel, satellites, and drones? Or is it as one skeptic suggested, a piece of "end of shift glass" from the North Platte 7-Up bottling plant from long ago? Take a look and you decide.

While in McCook, I suggest stopping at Sehnert's Bakery & Bieroc Café for coffee, homemade donuts, or a meal. When you go, please tell Matt and Shelly "hello" from me.

In Cherry County, Valentine has a claim to fame that no other Nebraska community can, uh, claim – the oldest standing high school building in the state. The school is now known as Centennial Hall Museum. A visitor will occasionally ring one of the 1,700 bells in the museum's Hallock Bell Collection (don't touch!). Some say that's not the only music heard here. Even though the instruments were removed decades ago, visitors report notes coming from the school's former music room.

Local folklore recounts the death of a female student in the 1940s after her clarinet reed was supposedly poisoned. Is her disembodied presence responsible for the ghostly tunes or the rocking chair seen rocking out on its own? Probably not. My friends over at the Cherry County Historical Society have been unable to authenticate that the murder ever took place. Spiritual energy aside, there's something else unexpected lurking here, a thrift shop.

My favorite museum item on display? It's the campaign poster for local rancher Americus Liberator. He ran for president multiple times and was the only presidential candidate beaten by Ronald Reagan three times!

To the southeast in Greeley County, the Happy Jack Chalk Mine doesn't have central air, but it's pretty cool. In fact, this labyrinth of subterranean tunnels – about a mile's worth – remains at a comfy 57 degrees year-round. Once a functioning mine to supply blocks for construction, and a source of material to produce paint and other products long ago, the mine is now the only publicly accessible chalk room and pillar mine in the United States. The "chalk" is actually

made up of the remains of uncountable billions of microscopic diatoms that were fossilized when they died and sank to the bottom of an ancient inland sea.

After checking out the cool mine, and working up a sweat climbing to the top of Happy Jack Peak for an amazing view of the Loup River Valley, I suggest making the short drive to Ord and Scratchtown Brewing Co. It's a cool place to meet with friends and plan other travels, and the locally-made brews are even colder. Cheers!

Winter is on the way. Get out and enjoy summer while you still can.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.