

# WESTWARD HO! FOLLOWING THE OREGON AND MORMON TRAILS



The journey to a new life in the west was long and arduous, and the graves of the many pioneers who did not make it remind modern-day travelers of the hardships these early pioneers faced. Follow their footsteps and their spirits as you go on your own pioneer journey across this great state. From the wide-open prairies of southeastern Nebraska to the rugged terrain of western Nebraska, this is a journey that will leave you feeling amazed and content.

## DAY 1

**Beatrice • Fairbury • Hebron • Superior • Red Cloud • Hastings**

### MORNING

Start your trek along the Overland Trails in Beatrice where you can step back into a time when this land was first settled by the early pioneers. **Homestead National Monument of America** (allow 1.5 hours) has hiking trails through virgin prairie grasses and living history demonstrations, while the Homestead Heritage Center brings the western homesteading story to life. Continue westward to Fairbury and **Rock Creek Station State Historical Park** (allow 1 hour), one of the best sites to view original Oregon Trail wagon ruts. This also is where “Wild” Bill Hickok gained notoriety for killing his first victims.

End your tour of Fairbury by exploring original artwork from Nebraska artists at **New Earth Clay Pottery and Art Gallery** (allow 1 hour). Next, continue westward to Hebron for a unique stop. Have your photograph taken while sitting on the World’s Largest Porch Swing (allow 30 minutes) before heading to lunch in town.

### AFTERNOON

After lunch, your next stop is **Superior Estates Winery** (allow 1 hour) in Superior for a glass of Nebraska wine and a stunning view of the vineyards. Continue on to historic Red Cloud, home to Pulitzer Prize-winning author Willa Cather. Tour Willa’s childhood home and seven renovated buildings that were important to her life and books at **Willa Cather State Historic Site** (allow 1.5 hours). The restored 1885 **Red Cloud Opera House** (allow 1 hour) houses a bookstore, art gallery, theatre and Willa Cather memorabilia.

The **Hastings Museum** (allow 1.5 hours) is home to one of the best natural history collections in the state, and its one-of-a-kind *Kool-Aid: Discover the Dream* interactive

exhibit highlights the story of the birth of one of America’s favorite soft drinks. Lifelike murals and replicas, a fiber-optic river of Kool-Aid, interactive kiosks and the original Kool-Aid Man costume tell the story. A short drive north is Grand Island and your lodging spot for the night.

## DAY 2

**Grand Island • Alda • Gibbon • Kearney**

### MORNING

Noted as one of the top 10 living history museums in the country, Grand Island’s **Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer** (allow 1.5 hours) will transport you back to the early days of the pioneers. Explore Fonner Park (allow 1.5 hours) and Grand Island’s newest exhibit, “**Raising Nebraska: Your food and the families who grow it.**” This 25,000 sq. ft. museum connects consumers with the farmers who raise their food by explaining the necessary steps to go from “farm to fork.” Afterward visit historic downtown Grand Island and the Grand Theatre for a refreshing cup of hot chocolate (allow 30 minutes).

During the annual sandhill crane migration in the spring, come face to face with these majestic birds during a personal guided Sandhill crane-viewing tour at the **Crane Trust Welcome Center** (allow 2-3 hours) or the **Rowe Sanctuary and Iain Nicolson Audubon Center** (allow 2-3 hours), between Grand Island and Kearney. It’s an amazing sight and sound that you’ll remember forever! Afterwards, and during the non-migration season, explore the gift shops, trails and other exhibits at these two great attractions.

### AFTERNOON

Enjoy lunch and a tour of **The Archway** (allow 2 hours) in Kearney. This impressive, three-story, interactive museum commemorates the nation’s westward expansion and is the only tourist attraction in the nation located over a federal interstate

highway. The **Classic Car Collection** (allow 1 hour) includes more than 140 vintage automobiles from the early 1900’s to the 1980’s and has been called the “best public car attraction between Chicago and Denver!”

Housed in a historic 1911 Renaissance revival post office, the **Museum of Nebraska Art** (allow 1 hour) features 11 exceptional galleries and more than 5,000 works of art highlighting Nebraska and the Great Plains. Round your evening in Kearney off with a tour of **Thunder Head Brewing Company**, followed by an award-winning beer and stone oven baked pizza for dinner (allow 1.5 hours). Kearney has a number of excellent lodging properties for you to choose from.

## DAY 3

**Lexington • North Platte • Paxton • Ogallala**

### MORNING

After breakfast, explore your westward trek. After breakfast, continue your westward trek to Lexington to tour an impressive collection of military equipment and machinery at the **Heartland Museum of Military Vehicles** (allow 1 hour). Your next stop is North Platte, home of NEBRASKAland Days and “Buffalo Bill” Cody. **Fort Cody Trading Post** (allow 45 minutes) is one of the state’s largest, and most eclectic, gift shops. Explore the Old West Museum in the back of the store and don’t miss the 20,000-piece, hand-carved animated miniature version of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.

Enjoy a spectacular 360-degree view of **Union Pacific Railroad’s Bailey Yard** (the world’s largest railroad classification yard) from atop the 95-foot tall, 8-story Golden Spike Tower and Visitor Center (allow 1 hour). Historical and regional railroad memorabilia can be purchased in the gift shop. Your final stop in North Platte is a tour of Colonel William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s house and historic barn at **Buffalo Bill State Historical Park** (allow 1 hour).

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## AFTERNOON

Stop in Paxton for a delicious, mouth-watering Nebraska steak at one of the state's most famous watering holes, **Ole's Big Game Steakhouse** (allow 1 hour). Your next stop is Ogallala and its colorful Old West character. Explore the **Petrified Wood and Art Gallery** (allow 45 minutes), a natural history gallery specializing in ancient woods, fossils and Native American artifacts.

Next take a drive to the state's largest lake, Lake McConaughy, and the **Lake McConaughy Visitor and Water Interpretive Center** (allow 1 hour). This is the state's first water-related educational facility and houses interactive exhibits highlighting the Platte River and the High Plains Aquifer.

Enjoy an authentic western dinner and the Crystal Palace Review at **Front Street and Cowboy Museum** (allow 2 hours). With gun fights, dance hall girls, cowboys and great

songs, the Crystal Palace review is the perfect ending to your day in Ogallala.

## DAY 4

Ogallala • Lewellen • Bayard • Gering

### MORNING

Tour the 1887 Victorian **Mansion on the Hill** (allow 45 minutes) before departing Ogallala for Lewellen and **Ash Hollow State Historical Park** (allow 1 hour). View original pioneer wagon ruts at this major Overland Trail stopover. Explore Ash Hollow Cave and learn about the area's history, archaeology, paleontology and Native Americans at the visitor center.

Continue to downtown Lewellen to **The Most Unlikely Place** where you'll admire pastels, watercolors, glass etchings and wood sculptures created by local artists before sitting down to a delicious lunch made with

local ingredients (allow 1.5 hours for tour and lunch).

## AFTERNOON

Depart for Bayard to visit Chimney Rock, the most recognized landmark along the Oregon Trail. **Chimney Rock National Historic Site Visitors Center** (allow 1.5 hours) showcases fascinating stories from pioneers as they trekked westward. Next stop is **Scotts Bluff National Monument** (allow 1.5 hours) near Gering. This was a prominent landmark for American Indians, fur traders, and Oregon and Mormon trail pioneers who used it as a guide westward. At 800 feet above the North Platte River, a drive to the summit gives you a tremendous view of the entire valley and the wagon ruts that are still visible at the base. A gift shop and museum in the visitor center show the historical importance of the trail and the area's colorful history.

