



5-Day Forecast
Currently: 73° F
Overcast
Humidity: 78%
Chance of precip: 100%



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- Opinion
- Sports
- Business
- Entertainment
- Life
- Classifieds
- Site Index
- Obituaries
- Register



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AP Photo/Mead Gruver

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Travel

A desert adventure

It's easy to get lost in wild and beautiful badlands

By MEAD GRUVER/ The Associated Press

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You probably would be better advised to stay away from this spectacular, strange desert. A four-wheel-drive, high-clearance vehicle is indispensable, there is no water and the nearest lodging - and the people who would search for you, should it come to that - are at least a three-hour drive away.

And it would be very easy indeed to get lost in this all-but-unknown landscape crazed by dead-end canyons and surreal formations.

Imagine stumbling aimlessly over lichen-painted rocks and storm-rippled arroyos, no one witnessing your travails except perhaps a speckled wild mare who vanishes behind a hoodoo - local parlance for sandstone formations - the moment you glimpse her.

But if you just happen to be a scrappy adventurer who loves to get lost, Adobe Town - a daylong sidetrip from Yellowstone or Grand Teton - is your place. You will be amply awarded for taking the trouble to get off the beaten path.

Just remember to mark your vehicle on your GPS receiver.

"To me, this is what Wyoming is in a nutshell, going out there and seeing the vastness of the landscape stretching to the horizon," said Eric Bonds, spokesman for the conservation group Biodiversity Associates.

Intrepid travelers to Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks might consider a daylong side trip to Adobe Town.

Nearly 7,000 feet above sea level, Adobe Town is high desert, thick with sand, sagebrush and prickly pear. A long, low ridge of oddly eroded sandstone inspired the name.

Some formations do resemble old Pueblo dwellings. But it gets stranger. Others look like the Sphinx, Chartres, or a 10-foot arm bearing a waiter's tray. The oddest-looking ones, much like those at Bryce Canyon National Park in Utah or South Dakota's Badlands National Parks, are called hoodoos.

There are no trails (except ones which obviously were made by wild horses and other wildlife) and only a couple of rough roads. If rain has fallen recently, mud is a problem. If rain has not fallen recently, sand can bog you down just as easily.

"Access can go from good to really bad, or it can stay static," said Jim Dunder, a local wildlife biologist with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management who knows the area well.

"You get a little moisture in the ground, a person can get through the sand dunes out there. If conditions have been dry for a period of time, it's advisable that two vehicles go together."

Monument Valley offers endless, if enigmatic, possibilities for exploring. A plan to trace the easiest terrain is frustrated by arroyos that vanish inexplicably at the base of cliffs or into the desert itself.

In some meandering canyons, water has tunneled under rock. But the canyons are short, leaving you at their source with a downward view of more odd landscape and wondering where all the water washes down from.

Bonds suggests taking the high ground: "Get out and wander along the rims. You can walk for hours or days in and out of the badland rims and never see another person."

Camping is allowed anywhere. "Most people like to go out and camp out above the rim on the west side of the Adobe Town and you can sort of hike down the rim," he said.

It would be hard to leave without seeing either antelope or wild horses. Antelope are ubiquitous and there are so many wild horses in the Adobe Town area - some 1,200 - the state has threatened to sue the BLM for not rounding up more each year and putting them up for adoption.

The horses are shy. But from a distance, they sometimes seem just as curious about you as you are about them. They stand and stare back awhile before trotting off over the next ridge.

The desert is also home to mountain plover, a predatory bird being considered for Endangered Species Act protection; as well as ferruginous (rust-colored) hawks, the largest hawk species in North America.



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There are also deer, mule deer, sage grouse, prairie dogs and possibly, living in prairie dog colonies, a rare black-footed ferret or two. Mind you, no one has actually seen a black-footed ferret in Adobe Town recently, but a not-very-old ferret skull was recently found.

"It's one of the last few places in Wyoming you can hear coyotes howl," Dunder said. "And early in the morning, you can see a bobcat on a ridge ... things like that."

Rich with fossils, especially from turtles and alligators, the area was a haunt of the famous rival paleontologists O.C. Marsh and E.D. Cope in the 19th century. But if you come across a 30 million-year-old turtle shell, remember that it is illegal for laypeople to disturb fossils on public land.

Much of the area is rich with natural gas, and companies have expressed interest in drilling. But the federal government has designated Adobe Town as a wilderness study area, which means it could eventually receive permanent protection as a designated wilderness.

Bonds, of course, believes the area deserves that status. "It's absolutely spectacular landscape that's really on par with other national monuments and national parks in the West," he said.

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