

Illustration: PIET GROBLER



Not exactly the Wall Street Journal

Middle America is backward. Apart from the odd dinosaur, the only roadside attractions are cops and cowboys

On a drive across the American Midwest I saw a dinosaur. It was on a billboard. The sign was one of a slew I had seen all across Iowa and halfway across South Dakota. Next to the dinosaur was written: "Wall Drug".

Reluctantly my boyfriend took the Wall Drug exit where I had wanted to find a small-town pharmacy in a shed, its dispensary lined with glass-bottled potions, old-fashioned suppository machines and gauze.

Instead it was a mega mall the size of a rugby field, a souvenir megalopolis, filled with cowboy boots and American Indian moccasins, packed with overheated holidaymakers seeking out bargains and air conditioning.

We followed the signs offering free coffee and doughnuts to honeymooners and I wondered if holding hands and calling each other "babe" would suffice as marital testimony.

But the long lovers' line was a turn-off so we settled for the free iced water that had jump-started the Wall Drug dynasty 70 years earlier and drove another mile before veering off the I-90 and parking next to a horse. It was the town of Wall's Saturday afternoon youth rodeo. Pigtailed cowgirls wearing pink blouses were saddled up on bucking horses for

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pole bending. Later that night we ate microwaved pumpkin pie at Marlen's diner, which had an all-you-can-eat-all-night breakfast buffet. Our glum waitress looked like she had just woken up to her reality and wasn't that impressed by it. We set up camp at a KOA (Kampgrounds of America), where we had wanted to sleep in their only teepee but it was already booked out by campers who were roasting S'mores (crackers, chocolate and marshmallows) on a gas stove.

The following day we crossed through the Badlands into Wyoming and pulled into a town called Gillette. Our choice was either Pokey's Barbeque Smokehouse, whose logo was a giant cartoon pig holding up basted pork ribs

on a skewer, or Gillette's Prime-Rib Restaurant, voted number one in the town since 1987.

We opted for the latter, which had no windows and looked more like a cellar than a chateau, but it boasted a selection of over 8 000 different wines.

The following day, Sunday, we got an early start. We eased into the slumber town of Basin, the seat of Big Horn County, tagged by a police siren, flashing lights and a voice on a megaphone ordering us to stop.

We pulled over by the town church and a cop approached our vehicle while slowly removing his aviator mirrored sunglasses. Harley was the bored cop playing the bad lad who was lucky to spot an out-of-town number plate and we were the sorry victims of his small-town speed trap.

He fined us \$98 for doing 40mph in a 30mph zone and said that speeding endangered the lives of Basin's citizens. But the only citizens out on the town were probably safely tucked into the church's pews.

Harley told us to appear in Basin's court in one month's time and next time to be on the lookout for them signs. But the only visible signs were those indicating the number of miles still to Wall Drug.