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Cherry County, Nebraska

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AND THE ANTELOPE, AND NOW 
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spectacular golf destination features two 18-hole courses, a
10-hole par-3 course, plus all the comforts of Midwestern
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of the great golf destinations of the world. Call 1-877-478-4003
or visit www.theprairieclub.com to get started.

"Top 100 Modern Courses In
The U.S."
- GOLFWEEK, 2014

"Top 10 Best Places For 36 Holes In
North America"
- LINKS MAGAZINE, 2013

"Top 100 Courses You Can Play
In America"
- GOLF DIGEST, 2014

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In the heart of north-central Nebraska is where you’ll fall in love with Cherry County. Grass-stabilized dunes roll across the county like waves on an inland ocean.

The dunes are made of sand deposited here eons ago by wind blowing from the northwest. Under these rolling waves, the Ogallala Aquifer holds the world’s largest underground source of fresh water. The pure, cold water bubbles up through the sand and runs into creeks and rivers that flow over bedrock to form some of America’s top canoeing and kayaking rivers. Fresh-water lakes create fisheries for record catches, and record-breaking good times on boats and personal watercraft.

Two national wildlife refuges provide safe-haven and sanctuary for animals and animal-watchers.

Valentine is the big-hearted welcome mat of Cherry County, and it greets you with a broadly-grinning main street filled with shops and restaurants. This is the “big city” of 2,800 friendly folks. Valentine will show you classic cowboys riding off to ranches and families who have called Cherry County home for generations.

This guide introduces you to our favorite attractions and most popular events. Call us toll-free at 1-800-658-4024 if you have any questions. We’re proud of our home, and as each page turns, your heart will yearn even more to visit Valentine. Enjoy your stay with us!
Niobrara River Outfitters

A & C Canoes
PO Box 267, Valentine, NE 69201
(402) 890-1245

Brewer’s Canoers (see pg. 18)
433 E. Hwy 20, Valentine, NE 69201
(402) 376-2046

Dryland Aquatics (see pg. 18)
101 Main St., Sparks, NE 69220
(402) 376-3119

Fritz’s Island Campground
H.C. 13 Box 380, Valentine, NE 69201
(402) 376-3791

Graham Canoe Outfitters (see pg. 7)
90173 Hatchery Road, Valentine, NE 69201
(402) 376-3708 off season (402) 376-3576

Heartland Elk Guest Ranch
90236 Sparks River Road, Valentine, NE 69201
(402) 376-2553

Little Outlaw Canoe & Tube
1005 E. Hwy 20, Valentine, NE 69201
(402) 376-1822

Niobrara River Ranch
90427 Timber Ridge Road
(402) 890-1245

Prairie River Outfitters
(see pg. 18)
41508 River Road, Sparks, NE 69220
(402) 376-1887

Rock Barn Camp & Outfitters
(see pg. 13)
H.C. 13, Sparks, NE 69220
(402) 376-1764

Rocky Ford Outfitters (see pg. 13)
PO Box 3, Valentine, NE 69201
(402) 497-3479
off season (402) 376-1124

Sharp’s Tubes & Canoes
90048 Sparks River Road, Sparks, NE 69220
(402) 376-2506

SuperTubes
2 mi. east of Valentine on Hwy 12
(402) 376-2956

Thank you to Explore Valentine outfitters! Listings in bold.
## Travel Times* and Distances from Cornell Bridge to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landmark</th>
<th>River Mi.</th>
<th>Road Mi.</th>
<th>Canoe Time</th>
<th>Drive Time</th>
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<tr>
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<td>20 min.</td>
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<td>Rock Barn</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7.5 hrs.</td>
<td></td>
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*tubers double canoe times
Nebraska’s Waterfalls

Smith Falls State Park

Of the Niobrara River Valley’s many waterfalls, the tallest is Smith Falls, 15 miles northeast of Valentine on Highway 12, then four miles south on a marked county road. The spring-fed falls, Nebraska’s tallest, drop 70 feet and flow out to the Niobrara River.

The short hike to Smith Falls is half the fun. A historic iron truss bridge, open to pedestrians only, spans the Niobrara. A trail leads across a grassy field into a secluded little canyon. At the end is the waterfall.

Also on the south side of the river, the Jim McAllister Nature Trail is a self-guided hiking trail, more than a mile long, which leads through a portion of the Niobrara River Valley. Known as the “biological crossroads of the Great Plains,” this stretch of the Niobrara is a place where eastern and western species of plants and animals overlap — six distinct biological systems in all. But you don’t have to be a biologist to appreciate the beauty of the valley’s natural diversity. The park is open April 1 through Nov. 30. Camping is available. Office hours are 8 a.m.-8 p.m., Memorial Day through Labor Day. (402) 376-1306.

Snake River Falls

Among Nebraska’s most spectacular waterfalls, Snake River Falls rushes over a 54-foot-wide ledge. When the Snake is full, it rushes over the edge at a rate of 230 cubic feet per second and sprays mist across the canyon. Water tumbles and turns like a mountain stream as it flows another 12 miles to the Niobrara River. It is 23 miles southwest of Valentine on Highway 97. Snake River Falls is open year-round, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission is $1 for adults, 75¢ for children under 18.

Smith Falls and Snake River Falls are the best known, but the Niobrara River Valley has many more. At Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge near Valentine, a hiking trail leads to Fort Falls, hidden in a secluded canyon. Also on the refuge is a two-tiered waterfall known as Stinard Falls. Downstream from Smith Falls, just below Fritz’s Island, Stairstep Falls is just what its name indicates.

As it turns out, Nebraska has many more waterfalls than anyone realized. In 2004, a National Parks Service-sponsored study cata-
LOGED the waterfalls of the Niobrara. The study found more than 180 falls along a 20-mile stretch of the valley. That was about twice as many as expected.

The Niobrara falls are unique because of their convex faces, meaning that they bulge outward, which is the opposite of what waterfalls usually do. This is because most of the falls are spring-fed and active year-round, preventing freeze-thaw action from eroding their faces. Also, the faces are protected by minerals from seeping groundwater and by the growth of algae, diatoms and lichens. While enjoying our rivers and falls, please respect private property rights and remember that trampling of delicate vegetation can cause erosion. Help us preserve natural treasures for future generations.

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**Nebraska Division of Tourism**
It is the ultimate pleasure cruise. Just bring a few snacks and let nature feed your soul on a river float. When you canoe or tube on the Niobrara National Scenic River, you will travel Nebraska’s second-fastest river, yet time stands still as you paddle on through awesome canyons and majestic cliffs.

As you ride on past the many waterfalls, spring-fed streams push you further onto swift waters over the bedrock and numerous riffles, chutes and easy rapids, and you and the eagles and hawks sail on. You can witness why Nebraska’s most popular river has been named among the top 10 canoeing rivers in the United States by Backpacker magazine and hailed as one of National Geographic’s top 100 adventures.

From Valentine, head east on Highway 12. Numerous country roads lead south from the highway to the river. Between Valentine and Norden, you’ll find plenty of outfitters, campgrounds and boat launches. To learn more, contact the Valentine Chamber of Commerce, (800) 658-4024, or the National Park Service, (402) 376-1901.
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Images by Laura Wrenn

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The history of Sandhills ranch life is on display at Arthur Bowring Ranch State Historical Park, a 7,202-acre ranch located three miles north and east of Merriman off Highway 20. Former U.S. Sen. Eve Bowring managed the ranch until her death in 1985 at age 92. Her wish was to preserve the ranch as a turn-of-the-20th-century working cattle ranch and living history museum.

It's a great opportunity to see ranch life up close. A visitor center houses artifacts and memorabilia of early ranching days. Corrals, barns, bunkhouses, even a sod house, are open to the public.

The park also has a collection you might not expect on a ranch. Eve Bowring was a world-traveler and passionate collector of antique china, silver and glass, and her amazing collection is displayed inside the ranch house.

Buildings and grounds are open Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, 8 a.m.–8 p.m. The grounds are open from 9 a.m. to sunset the rest of the year. (308) 282-0730.

While in the area, don’t miss Cottonwood Lake State Recreation Area, a half mile east of Merriman on Highway 20 and a half mile south. Fishing, boating and tent camping are available. A state park permit is required. (308) 684-3428.
The Sandhills

It is a voyage in a sea of grass that can only be found in Nebraska's Sandhills – the largest mass of grass-stabilized sand dunes in the Western Hemisphere. As you sail on through the vastness of these 19,000 square miles, you realize this is a land where artists, poets, photographers and ranchers see so much more.

Rolling hills rise up as the tsunami of the prairie. Grassy waves tower 400 feet high. Once dreaded as an unlivable desert, the most fantastic sandbox on our planet is held together by deep-rooted grasses, making it prime real estate for immense cattle ranches. Cows not only outnumber people here, they practically jump over the moon for the grass nourished by the Ogallala Aquifer, which is one of the largest groundwater sources in the world.

The aquifer flows into pristine spring-fed lakes. On a map, the Sandhills may appear as only a large land mass in north-central Nebraska, which would be like calling the ocean a large body of water. This is a joyride that shouldn't be missed. You won't find land like this anywhere else on earth.

Fresh spring water flows from the Ogallala Aquifer to form pure rivers through the Sandhills.

The photo shows a landscape image of the Sandhills.

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Merritt Reservoir

Merritt Reservoir is an oasis amid the giant oasis of the Sandhills. The second deepest lake in Nebraska surfaces just miles south of Snake River Falls and the Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest, surrounded by gentle bluffs, 44 miles of tree-lined shores baked in sugar-sand beaches, with 3,000 acres of precious waters for swimming luxury, and a fishing adventureland.

This land is a siren's call to hunters, bird-watchers, and of course, fishers. Dozens of master angler and state records have been recorded here. The lake is known for its largemouth, smallmouth and white bass, as well as perch, crappie, bluegill, channel catfish, muskellunge, northern pike and walleye.

Merritt is so distant from city lights that amateur astronomers gather here each July for the "Nebraska Star Party." The park is open year-round. Electrical and primitive camping available, along with handicapped accessible showers, restrooms and picnic areas. (402) 376-3320.

It is a place to discover many things, especially your bliss.

Christopher Amundson (both)
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Only in the Sandhills would you find a national forest that's mostly grass. "Only" 5,000 acres of Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest are wooded with eastern red cedar, scotch, jack and ponderosa pine. The other 110,000 acres are Sandhills prairie. The result is stunning blend of scenery and wildlife.

The area is open to hunting in season, offering excellent upland game bird hunting, waterfowl and limited deer hunting. Other popular activities include fishing, hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing and bird watching. Merritt Reservoir is nearby, offering a variety of water recreation. Observational blinds are available March 15-May 31. Ranger station hours are Monday-Friday, 7:30 a.m.-4 p.m.

Year-round camping is available at Steer Creek Campground, a beautiful and secluded site. Campers say the only sounds you're likely to hear are birdsong, the occasional lowing of cattle from a nearby herd and the whisper of a breeze through the surrounding pines. Bluejay Trail is a one-mile loop for hikers.

The forest is southwest of Valentine. Go 30 miles west of Valentine on Highway 20 to Nenzel, then 18 miles south on Highway S16-F. (402) 823-4154.
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Five miles east of Valentine on Highway 12, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge is home to herds of bison, elk and a prairie dog town, as well as more than 230 species of birds. Because of its location near the center of North America, the refuge is on the flight path for many species of migratory birds. The refuge includes a pine-dotted canyon with nature trails and a favorite “putting-in” spot for Niobrara River canoeists. A 3.5-mile driving tour lets you view the herds up close. Just remember – while near the herds, stay in your car. A buffalo bull can weigh a ton and can move with astonishing speed.

Near the Niobrara River, a steep, 3/4-mile nature trail descends from an overlook site down to the base of Fort Falls, then continues to the river and circles back to the top of the canyon. It’s a strenuous hike, well-rewarded with scenery and wildlife.

As the name indicates, the refuge is the site of a frontier fort. Fort Niobrara was active from 1879-1906 and was used as a cavalry remount station until 1911. Long before that, however, the grounds were home to long-jawed mastodons, giant bison and three-toed horses. Fossils are displayed in the visitor center, which is open 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and Monday through Friday the rest of the year. Admission is free. (402) 376-3789.
The 72,000-acre Valentine National Wildlife Refuge is 20 miles south of Valentine on Highway 83. The refuge is a collection of shallow lakes surrounded by marshes in a remote Sandhills landscape.

The refuge offers spectacular birdwatching. During annual migrations, thousands of ducks and geese stop to feed. In April and May, photo blinds are placed on prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse display grounds. For the best wildlife viewing, come early in the morning or before sunset.

Nine lakes are open for fishing year round. Fishing hours are sunup to sundown; only electric boat motors are allowed. Anglers come for the bass, bluegill, perch and northern pike. For summer fishing, we recommend using a small boat or float tube. But don't let winter weather keep you away: the ice fishing world record bluegill, more than two pounds, was caught in the refuge at Pelican Lake.

In addition to other game and waterfowl, the refuge is known as one of the few places where hunters find both sharp-tailed grouse and prairie chickens.

The refuge offers 80 miles of sand trails for hiking only. A self-guided interpretive trail has informative kiosks along the way. (You can pick up a map at refuge headquarters, located five miles east of Valentine on Highway 12.)

The refuge is open year-round during daylight hours. Camping and fires are prohibited. Admission is free. (402) 376-3789.

A third location of preservation in the area is the 56,000 acres of The Nature Conservancy’s Niobrara Valley Preserve southeast of Valentine. This working ranch has 25 miles of riverfront along the Niobrara, plus prairies and woodlands supporting hundreds of animal species, including a herd of American bison. The preserve offers a scenic nature trail that is open to the public. (402) 722-4400.

Prepare for your next Outdoor Adventure

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www.VisitValentine.com
Valentine and Our Community

Travelers come to Cherry County for the adventure; residents stay for the lifestyle. “You can have as much solitude as you want, or you can be as outgoing and friendly as you want,” says Midland News editor Laura Vroman. “People go out of their way to be friendly.”

Traditionally, cattle ranching is the area’s backbone. Cherry County has more beef cows than any other county in the United States (169,000 according to recent counts). Thursday is livestock auction day in Valentine. At the auction barn on the city’s east side, men and women on horseback guide cows and calves to and from the sales ring. Buyers sit on bleachers, 10 deep and steep. With a shake of the head or a slight finger wave, dozens of cattle are exchanged for tens of thousands of dollars in one or two minutes.

With 2,800 residents, Valentine is the area’s big city. People in the region come for shopping, medical services at the county hospital, or government services. Over the past few decades, river traffic has enriched Valentine, bringing retail stores, motels and restaurants.

Cherry County Hospital is a Medicare-certified Critical Access Hospital offering a full range of services. Local medical staff includes four board-certified family-practice physicians and two physician assistants. Specialists from a dozen different fields of medicine visit the hospital on a scheduled basis to contract outpatient clinical and surgical procedures. The hospital has full-time anesthesia available, a full-time pharmacist and physical therapists.

Valentine is fortunate to have an excellent public school system. With modern facilities and a teacher-to-student ratio of 1 to 13 at the elementary and senior high and 1 to 14 at the middle school, students receive plenty of individual attention. Mid-Plains Community College offers college-level classes locally, and Sinte Gleska University is only 35 miles from Valentine.

To learn more about life in Valentine and Cherry County, call us at (800) 658-4024, or visit www.VisitValentine.com.

The Prairie Club

The Prairie Club, which opened in 2010, offers two 18-hole courses and a 10-hole course stretched out over 1,260 acres south of Valentine along the Snake River. Of the two championship-length courses, the “Dunes” course consists of dramatic changes in elevation, vast blow-out bunkers...
The Prairie Club is a world-class links style golf course etched into the gently rolling sand hills south of Valentine along the Snake River.

and breathtaking views in all directions. Canyon views and the remains of an ancient ponderosa forest are elements that make the "Pines" course an epic experience for worldwide golfers.

Convenient to both courses is The Prairie Club Lodge, offering dining, a golf shop and overnight accommodations. Guests may choose to stay at one of several four-bedroom cabins in view of the Snake River Canyon.

The Prairie Club will be semi-private. While preference for lodging and tee times will go to members, one of the courses will be designated for public play each day. "Our mission is to touch the soul of the golfer," said Paul Schock, The Prairie Club's developer. "This is a place where men and women have always chased their dreams: buffalo, antelope, summering ponies, vast herds of beef cattle and, now, a little white ball." (888) 402-1101.

Museums
Valentine started out a lot rougher than its name. It began in 1883 as a rowdy, end-of-the-track railroad town. The name honored E.K. Valentine, a Civil War veteran and congressman known as a friend to settlers.

The area was home to cattlemen, outlaws and Indians. Legendary horse thief "Doc" Middleton used to hide out at a place known as Rustler's Roost southwest of town. Sioux and Pawnee Indians came to hunt buffalo and to summer their horses on the lush Sandhills grass. Clashes between cowboys and Indians led to the founding of Fort Niobrara four miles east of town.

The Cherry County Historical Society Museum, at the corner of Main Street and Highway 20, has displays of the early days. It is open Memorial Day through Labor Day, Thursday-Saturday, 1-5 p.m. or by appointment. (402) 376-2015.

Built in 1897, Centennial Hall stands at 3rd and Macomb streets, with bragging rights as the oldest standing high school building in Nebraska. In 1983 it was saved from destruction by the efforts of a local nonprofit organization who called themselves "Save the Old School," and it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places the next year. Today, 12 rooms contain exhibits and collections of Sandhills history. Occasionally a vacant rocking chair or the sound of haunting music have testified to the ghostly presence of a student who died here in the 1940s, the victim of a poisoned clarinet reed. The museum is open Memorial Day through Labor Day. (402) 376-1455.

Valentine State Fish Hatchery
Located in a pine-covered valley one mile east and one mile north of Valentine, the Valentine Fish Hatchery is one of five hatcheries in Nebraska. Because demand for fish exceeds natural supply, the state has operated hatcheries for more than a century.

Spread over 700 acres, the hatchery handles millions of fish eggs annually (60 million walleye eggs, for example). Last year, lakes in Cherry County alone were stocked with some 675,000 fish. Just to the north, Government Canyon is a 640-acre area of prime wildlife habitat offering hiking, biking, birdwatching and hunting in specified areas. To find the hatchery, drive north on Green Street on the eastern edge of Valentine. (402) 376-2244.

The Cowboy Trail
The Cowboy Trail stretches from Norfolk to Valentine. The crushed limestone trail follows the gentle hills and curves of an abandoned railroad. Its longest and most spectacular bridge is just outside Valentine, soaring 148 feet above the Niobrara River. The trail is open a half-hour before sunrise to a half-hour after sunset. Go to Trailhead Park on south Main Street in Valentine. (402) 471-0641.
Valentine Events

Cork Thornton Ice Fishing Tournament
Jan. 25. Teams race across the ice at the gunshot start of this favorite annual event. Find a partner and compete for the team that catches the most weight. Or, drill your hole and try for the big fish competition. Registration and Calcutta are the night before teams take to the ice. (402) 376-1988.

Heart City Bull Bash
Feb. 14. The region’s best bulls are penned up on Main Street. Visit with area ranchers, find treasures from vendors, and explore downtown merchants in the Old West holdout of Valentine. (402) 376-3000.

Valentine’s 1884 Days
April 25. Valentine has grown a lot since 1884 when it was just a few cabins near the end of the railroad line. Join residents as they honor their history and dress in period costumes while local businesses offer bargains and specials. (800) 658-4024.

Valentine High School Rodeo
May 30. These kids will cowboy-up, pull-up their boots to provide an entertaining show while trying to qualify for state. Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway. (402) 376-2969.

Valentine Alumni Reunion and Banquet
June 27. Catch up with old friends as Valentine alumni come back to their Sandhills home. (800) 658-4024.

Sod House Sunday – Merriman
June 28. The former home of U.S. Sen. Eve Bowring and her ranging husband, Arthur, hosts this trip to the past with a church service, team penning, estate tours and children's games. (308) 684-3428.

Independence Day
July 4. This frontier town does up Independence Day right with a host of community events topped-off with a top-notch fireworks display. (402) 376-2969.

Valentine’s Day Celebration
Feb. 8. Show your special Valentine how much you care. It won’t cost but a couple of stamps and a little time. Buy or make a Valentine’s Day card and address it to your special someone, put it in an envelope and mail to Cupid’s Mail Box, PO Box 201, Valentine, NE 69201. The Valentine Post Office will cancel your love note with a special stamp and send it on for you. If you are in Valentine that special day, maybe renew your vows in the heart city. There will be a chili cook-off, and don’t miss the Chocolate Lover’s Experience. Local restaurants will be serving heart-shaped steaks that you will just love, made to order. (402) 376-1988.

City-wide Garage Sales
July 11. Don’t miss this opportunity to scoop up the treasures that Valentiners pull out from the closets, attics and garages for this city-wide rummage extravaganza. (800) 658-4024.

Turtle Races and Minnechaduza Days
June 6. These rubber turtles don’t bite like them ol’ snappers, and they don’t swim either. But one of them has to win the float down Minnechaduza Creek, and it just as well be yours. Cash and prizes for the winners. Enjoy food, games, golf, volleyball and fishing tournaments. (800) 658-4024.

Nebraska Star Party
July 12-17. Gather at Merritt Reservoir with a few hundred other star gazers and you’ll be seeing stars, too. The low level of light pollution in the Sandhills makes this an event worth seeing. (402) 489-8197.

Cherry County Fair and Rodeo
Aug. 5-9. The 2015 Cherry County Fair marks the 129th year of the famed event. Celebrate cowboy culture with a PRCA rodeo. Other fun awaits you at the garden tractor pull, 4-wheeler pull, art show and other community events. (402) 491-3502.

Old Settlers Reunion – Sparks
Aug. 29. As always, the population of tiny Sparks swells on the last Saturday of August. This summer marks the 127th anniversary of the event. Try your hand at the horseshoe pitching tourney, and watch the horse races, too. Awards will be given for the youngest and oldest visitor, and the new Sparks Museum and Sparks store will be open. (402) 376-3119.

Bison Roundup
Fall – call for date. Visitors are encouraged to observe and photograph the thundering bison herd at Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge as the animals are rounded up in this much-anticipated annual event. (402) 376-3789.

Old West Days & Nebraska Cowboy Poetry Gathering
Oct. 8-11. The best from the region come to compare verse, and show their softer side. Stay for the arts and crafts, a quilt show, parade and trail ride. (402) 376-2969.
Visitors enjoy a view across the Niobrara River at Smith Falls State Park east of Valentine.

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