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Editor's Note: This story recently earned its author, Laura Daily, a Bronze Award (Short Travel Article) in the 2009 Society of American Travel Writers Foundation Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Competition. AAA World congratulates Laura and thanks her for her frequent contributions to our publication. Blast From the Past first appeared on this Web site in January 2009.

Blast From the Past

*Revisit the Cold War at the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site.
by Laura Daily*

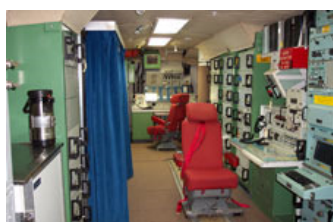
Packed just a little too close for comfort in the small elevator, seven of us slowly descend 31 feet under the South Dakota prairie. Our destination? A former home away from home for two Air Force officers charged with launching any counterattack to a nuclear strike against the U.S. during the Cold War.



The elevator doors open, and we catch our first glimpse of an egg-shaped capsule suspended on giant shock absorbers. The eight-ton blast door causes us to chuckle and likely had the same effect on its occupants. Some art-inclined crew member has painted it to resemble a Domino's pizza box with the slogan "World-wide delivery in 30 minutes or less or your next one is free."

It wasn't a hollow promise National Park Service Ranger Chris Wilkinson explains. "A Minuteman II missile could reach speeds of 15,000 miles per hour. Meaning it could carry its 1.2 megaton warhead to an enemy target 6,000 miles away in just half an hour."

We step into the launch control center (LCC) where for three decades crews of two would man their post, that massive door closed behind them. This is no high-tech, computer-laden military bunker, at least by today's standards. There's a small refrigerator and ancient microwave, toilet, bunk bed, telephone and a teletype machine precursor to today's e-mail.



Though officers continually practiced launch sequences, they had plenty of time on their hands. "Not surprisingly, the job appealed to those intent on furthering their college education," Wilkinson says. "There were few distractions for those who needed to study."

Wilkinson points out the slots where the commander and deputy would have inserted their launch keys and dispels another Cold War myth. "There was no 'finger on the button,'" he says. Instead a missile launch required proper authentication codes and two keys turned simultaneously within two seconds of each other in the LCC. At the same time, two officers in another LCC had to do the same."

This underground foray may be the afternoon's highlight, but it's only one part of Minuteman Missile National Historic Site. Our tour actually began topside in the Delta-01 launch center originally opened in November 1963. Until 1993, security and support personnel manned the facility protecting both the missileers and the surrounding missile tucked neatly in their silos. Not exactly famous for its decorating skills, the Air Force kept the place much as initially furnished: shag carpet, orange kitchen cabinets, Formica cafeteria-style tables and mod lounge furniture.

That it looks just as it did when active is a point of pride for the National Park Service, which fought to preserve one missile launch facility after the 1991 signing of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) when the U.S. and USSR agreed to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

After time-warping to the 1960s, we caravan nine miles to the Delta-09 missile silo. Though originally covered by a 90-ton door, the unarmed Minuteman II test missile can now be viewed through a clear dome. At one point, 1,000 missiles dotted the heartland of America. Today no active missile sites remain in South Dakota, Wilkinson tells us. "Though there still are 500 deployed in the upper Great Plains...just in case."

If You Go:

Minuteman Missile Historic Site is open Monday through Friday, year-round. Spaces on tours are limited to six people so make reservations in advance. Ninety-minute tours are given twice daily in the summer at 9 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. and once a day at 10 a.m. in the fall, winter and spring. The site is about a 45-minute drive from Rapid City, or just west of Wall, South Dakota. For the latest information, call 605/433-5552 or go to nps.gov/mimi

Military buffs lusting for an extra dose of avionics should also visit the South Dakota Air and Space Museum at Ellsworth Air Force Base (seven miles east of Rapid City on I-90), which houses Cold War-era artifacts, aircraft like a B-29 Superfortress and EC-135 refueling Stratotanker, missiles and a replica of a Delta launch control center. An Ellsworth AFB bus tour operates mid-May to mid-September and includes a tour of a Minuteman missile silo training launch facility. Museum admission is free. Bus tours \$7/adults, \$4/children 12 and younger; sdairandspacemuseum.com.

The information in this story was accurate when it was published on the AAA World Web site in January 2009, but details such as dates, times and prices may have changed since then. We suggest you verify such details directly with the listed establishments before making travel plans.