

BADLANDS BLACK HILLS

NATIONAL PARK TRIP PLANNER

Essential
Tips To
Plan Your
Vacation



A Park
Map



National Park Trips



UNDER CANVAS

Recognized by *Travel + Leisure* as a "Best Hotel in The World," Under Canvas Mount Rushmore is the ideal basecamp for discovering the colorful history, diverse nature, and rich heritage of South Dakota's Black Hills. Located less than four miles from Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Under Canvas offers upscale canvas tent accommodations with king-size beds, luxe linens, ensuite bathrooms, and majestic views.

Discover the best of the Black Hills at Under Canvas Mount Rushmore.

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GETTING THERE

See the spectacular wildlife, parks, towns and monuments of western South Dakota.



When you travel to the Black Hills area, you'll find the monumental attractions are much like the bison roaming the wide-open prairies: they're clustered close together and each is as equally majestic as the previous one.

On the eastern side, you'll find Minuteman Missile National Historic Site and Badlands National Park, home to curious-looking hills with magical colors. Just north lies the quirky attraction of Wall Drug in South Dakota, a popular rest stop known for its 5-cent coffee and Jackalope statue.

Beyond lies Mount Rushmore National Memorial in Keystone, S.D., hot springs in, well, Hot Springs, S.D., and two sites that give you a rare glimpse into the underbelly of the Earth: Wind Cave National Park and Jewel Cave National Monument.

Come up for air and head to Custer for Broadway-caliber performances and wildlife-viewing at nearby Custer State Park. Then head to the Crazy Horse Memorial, the largest monument carving in the world. This sculpture of Oglala Lakota Chief Crazy Horse is still under construction.

Afterwards, head to Hill City or Keystone, to board The 1880 Train for a thrilling ride. Farther north is Deadwood's cobblestone-lined Main Street where you can see Wild West reenactments. What follows are highlights from this epic area.



PARKS TO SEE

Here are the top seven parks, monuments and memorials to visit during your vacation.

By Tori Peglar



MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Here's a pop quiz. Name the U.S. presidents carved into the granite hillside of Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

If the names didn't come to you in five seconds, step on the gas and head to the memorial. Constructed from 1927-41, it features the faces of four U.S. presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. Why did sculptor Gutzon Borglum choose these men? He felt they presided over the country during its most important moments.

The human effort required to create this monument matched the gargantuan size of it. More than 400 women and men worked a variety of jobs from drillers to housekeepers during the 14 years it took to build it. Ninety percent of the mountain was carved using dynamite, but it was the people hanging off steel cables and chiseling at the rock amid freezing cold and sweltering heat who made Mount Rushmore what it is today. Before they started their day, workers had to climb 700 steps to the top of the mountain. Imagine the shape you'd be in if you had to do that to get to your desk every morning.

PHOTO: Mount Rushmore National Memorial (Depositphotos)

MINUTEMAN MISSILE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

For 30 years, 1,000 nuclear missiles sat in the prairie of South Dakota ready to be launched at any moment. Why? During the Cold War from 1963-91, the threat of nuclear attack from the Soviets was palpable. Ironically, building a nuclear arsenal for what became known as the “arms race” between the U.S. and Soviet Union proved critical to creating a deterrent to nuclear war. Start at the visitor center before touring Launch Facility Delta-09 or make advanced reservations to tour Launch Control Facility Delta-01.



BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK

While you won't see saber-toothed cats or rhinoceroses roaming the Badlands like they once did, you may see their remains in this stunning national park with some of the world's richest fossil deposits.

Located in Imlay Township in South Dakota, Badlands National Park has a Fossil Preparation Lab where you can watch paleontologists at work, literally uncovering the area's ancient history. At the Ben Reifel Visitor Center, use a touchscreen to assemble a virtual skeleton, touch fossilized animal replicas and watch the film *Land of Stone and Light* in the center's 95-seat air-conditioned theater.

Head out to see the wildlife that roams today. Spot bison, bighorn sheep, black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs as you drive the Badlands Hwy. 240 Loop Road. Then explore its many hiking trails on foot.





CRAZY HORSE MEMORIAL

When the first blast took place to begin work on Crazy Horse Memorial, five survivors of the Battle of the Little Bighorn watched.

It was June 3, 1948, and sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski had been hired by Henry Standing Bear, an Oglala Lakota chief, to build a memorial to honor all Native Americans. The image being carved is of Oglala Chief Crazy Horse who fought to preserve his people's way of life and led his warriors to victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876.

Seventy years after the first blast, you can watch crews carving and blasting the memorial. Four of Ziolkowski's children and some of his 23 grandchildren work on the sculpture, which is the world's largest monument carving. Located 17 miles from Mount Rushmore, it's financed by admission fees and donations. No federal or state funds are accepted.

Sample Native American food at Laughing Water Restaurant and stop in the museum and gift shop that feature local artists.

WIND CAVE NATIONAL PARK

While you may never have heard of it, Wind Cave National Park was the seventh national park to be created. President Theodore Roosevelt, who fell in love with the Dakotas, designated it in 1903. With slightly more than 140 miles of passageways, it's the sixth longest cave on Earth. Four new miles of cave are discovered every year.

There's also wildlife to be seen, including 400-500 bison roaming more than 20 acres of this national park. Their history is fascinating. After the massive slaughter of bison in the 1800s, bison had virtually been wiped out in the Black Hills area. In 1914, park reserve managers decided to reintroduce bison to the area and found their future bison in one of the most unlikely places. Home to some of the last genetically wild bison in the nation, the New York City Zoo boarded 14 bison, including one named "Sandy" on an express train to the Black Hills. When Sandy died of old age in 1936, newspapers across the country reported she was the first bison to be born in a zoo and die on the range.





JEWEL CAVE NATIONAL MONUMENT

See something called “cave bacon” when you take the popular Scenic Tour in the depths of Jewel Cave National Monument located 13 miles from Custer, S.D.

As the world’s third-longest cave, Jewel boasts 182 miles of mapped passages. Rock climbers Herb and Jan Conn, who first visited Jewel in 1959, mapped more than 60 miles of the cave from 1959-81. Prior to the Conns, the cave was thought to be small. Short in stature and big on adventure, the Conns spent more than five decades living in a stone house with no electricity or running water near Custer, rock climbing in the Needles and crawling through Jewel. Herb Conn, who died in 2012, had a favorite caving T-shirt that read, “No end in sight.”

Fortunately, for the rest of us, there are guided tours on established trails for us to explore. On the Scenic Tour, you’ll spend an hour and 20 minutes on a half-mile paved loop with electric lighting and 723 steps. Dress in closed-toe shoes and warm layers. The cave is 49 degrees. Tickets for this tour are first-come, first-served, can only be bought at the cave and often sell out before noon. Others have age limits and reservation requirements. Park entrance is free, but cave tours have fees.

CUSTER STATE PARK

With more than 1,300 bison, along with a fleet of pronghorn antelope, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, deer, elk and more, it would be easy to call South Dakota’s Custer State Park the Yellowstone of the Midwest.

Drive the Wildlife Loop Road to maximize your wildlife-viewing on the park’s open prairies and hillsides. Along the way, stop by the Wildlife Station Visitor Center to see exhibits and learn more. The drive generally takes about 45 minutes, but be prepared for traffic jams when bison loiter on the road.

Three other scenic byways in the park include the Needles Highway, Iron Mountain and Mount Coolidge Lookout. Beyond the road, explore the park’s five lakes. Rent kayaks at Sylvan Lake or hike Black Elk Peak, formerly Harney Peak, the state’s highest natural point. Legion Lake offers campsites as well as a restaurant and swimming.



THE STUNNING SIX

Here are some of our favorite things to do from hiking to exploring some of the most iconic treasures in the Badlands/Black Hills.



1

VISIT BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Drive the Badlands Loop Road from the Ben Reifel Visitor Center to the West Entrance, a 22-mile stretch that includes amazing wildlife and dramatic overlooks.



2

TAKE A DIP OR RIDE THE RAILS

Soak in the hot springs at Moccasin Springs Natural Mineral Spa or slip down the water slides at Evans Plunge in Hot Springs. Afterwards, ride the 1880 Train that runs between Hill City and Keystone.



3

GO DOWN UNDER

Head to Wind Cave National Park or Jewel Cave National Monument where you'll see incredible mineral formations and learn interesting cave trivia.



4

SEE A WILD WEST REENACTMENT

Explore the namesake for the TV series *Deadwood* when you visit this historic town. Don't miss the Main Street Shootout that happens three times a day (2 p.m., 4 p.m. and 6 p.m.) Monday through Saturday during the summer season.



5

SUNSET AT MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Attend the memorial's evening program in the outdoor amphitheater. Listen to a park ranger speak before watching the film *Mount Rushmore: The Shrine*. Then see the lighting of the memorial.



6

WATCH WILDLIFE AND A SHOW AT CUSTER STATE PARK

Drive the scenic Needles Highway, a 14-mile stretch of sharp turns and granite formations, and watch herds of buffalo roam this park. Then spend the evening at the park's Black Hills Playhouse where you can watch a performance.

PHOTOS: Badlands National Park panoramic [Depositphotos]; Grassy meadow in Badlands National Park [©Adobe Stock]; Train [Courtesy Hill City CVB]; Jewel Cave National Monument [Murray Foubister/Flickr]; Main Street Shootout [Courtesy Deadwood]; Mount Rushmore National Memorial [©Joshua J. McDonough/Adobe Stock]; Buffalo at Custer State Park [Depositphotos]

WILDLIFE GUIDE

There's more than monuments in this incredible corner of South Dakota.

Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife.



PRONGHORN ANTELOPE

Pronghorn, often called antelope, are the second-fastest land mammal, running up to 60 miles per hour. They are only three feet tall at their shoulders and are reddish brown with white stomachs and wide, white stripes on their throats. Females and males have forward facing horns that curve slightly backward at their tips. They eat grass and sagebrush and chew their partially digested food.

SEE THEM: In Badlands National Park, they can sometimes be seen from the Badlands Loop Road. In Wind Cave National Park, look for them in the open prairie near the south entrance to the park headquarters and along NPS Road 5.



YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOTS

These curious creatures live in colonies of about 10-20 marmots where they spend the middle of the day and nights in a network of high-elevation burrows located in rocky areas or meadows. They eat in the mornings and evenings, munching on flowers, grass, insects and even bird eggs. When they are feeding in the open, one stands guard, whistling when danger appears.

Marmots hibernate for quite some time, usually from late October until late April.

SEE THEM: At Mount Rushmore, look for them on the Presidential Trail during the summer, eating grass, plants and seeds.



MOUNTAIN GOATS

Mountain goats are covered with two layers of wool that enable them to withstand temperatures that dip to -50 degrees. They have large hooves and rough pads to scale steep, rugged slopes. Both females and males have black horns and long faces with fur hanging off their chins. Females, called "nannies," live with children and females. Males live apart in groups of 2-3. They can jump nearly 12 feet.

SEE THEM: Not native to the Black Hills, the 200 mountain goats that live in the area are descendants of six goats gifted from Canada to Custer State Park in 1924. You can see them at Mount Rushmore, too.



BIGHORN SHEEP

Traveling in groups, bighorn sheep are built for spending long winters at high elevation. Born with rough split hooves, they climb up steep, rocky terrain to escape predators. Males, also known as "rams," have larger horns that can weigh up to 30 pounds. Females, referred to as "ewes," have horns that never form more than half a curl. Bighorn sheep eat grasses and shrubs. In fall rams compete for ewes by butting each other for up to 24 hours at a time.

SEE THEM: In Badlands National Park, bighorn sheep are often seen in the Pinnacles area or near Cedar Pass.



BISON

Millions of bison once roamed the Great Plains before hunting and sport killing decimated the population. Today, in Custer State Park, there are 1,300 bison, one of the largest publicly owned herds in the world. Bison can weigh up to 2,000 pounds. While they may seem docile, they are unpredictable and have injured approaching visitors. They can run up to speeds of 35 miles per hour.

SEE THEM: They often stop traffic along the 18-mile Wildlife Loop Road in Custer State Park. In Badlands, see bison in the western portion of the northern edge of the park from Sage Creek Rim Road. At Wind Cave, look for them in grasslands near prairie dog towns and on the edge of forests.



BLACKTAIL PRAIRIE DOGS

Stewards of grasslands but viewed as an annoyance by some, prairie dogs are highly social animals with a specialized form of communication with complex sounds. Prairie dog towns can stretch from one acre to several hundred. They eat grass and hide in a networks of underground tunnels. They inhabit grasslands, perching on mounds to look for predators.

SEE THEM: In Wind Cave, one prairie dog town is located 1.2 miles north of the visitor center at the junction of hwy. 385 and 87. In Badlands, see them at the Roberts Prairie Dog Town.

INSIDER'S TIPS

From what to pack to entrance fees and weather, here's the scoop.



ONLINE

Visit MyYellowstonePark.com to find out where to stay and what to do during your vacation. Interested in exploring other national parks? Check us out at NationalParkTrips.com.



PACKING LIST

- ☐ Refillable water bottles or a hydration system
- ☐ Binoculars
- ☐ Clothing layers to accommodate temperature fluctuations of 30-40 degrees in one day.



- ☐ A sun hat, sunglasses and sunscreen
- ☐ Rain jacket & bug spray
- ☐ Sturdy hiking boots
- ☐ Daypack

Learn more at MyYellowstonePark.com/park/what-to-pack.


OUTSIDE+ MEMBERSHIP

Become a member of Outside+ to get access to a year of Gaia GPS Premium for trail maps with weather and topo overlays, plus get exclusive content online and on Outside TV. Learn more at MyYellowstonePark.com/OutsidePlus.



SOCIAL

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PARK ENTRANCE FEES*

Buy your pass at a park entrance station, purchase a digital pass at recreation.gov or order a card online at REI.com (with no shipping costs).

\$80

price of America the Beautiful annual pass for all national park sites

\$35

cost for 3-plus people per car to enter Crazy Horse Memorial (this is not a national park site: \$30 if only 2 people in car; \$15 for 1 person in car)

\$30

fee for a seven-day vehicle pass for Badlands National Park

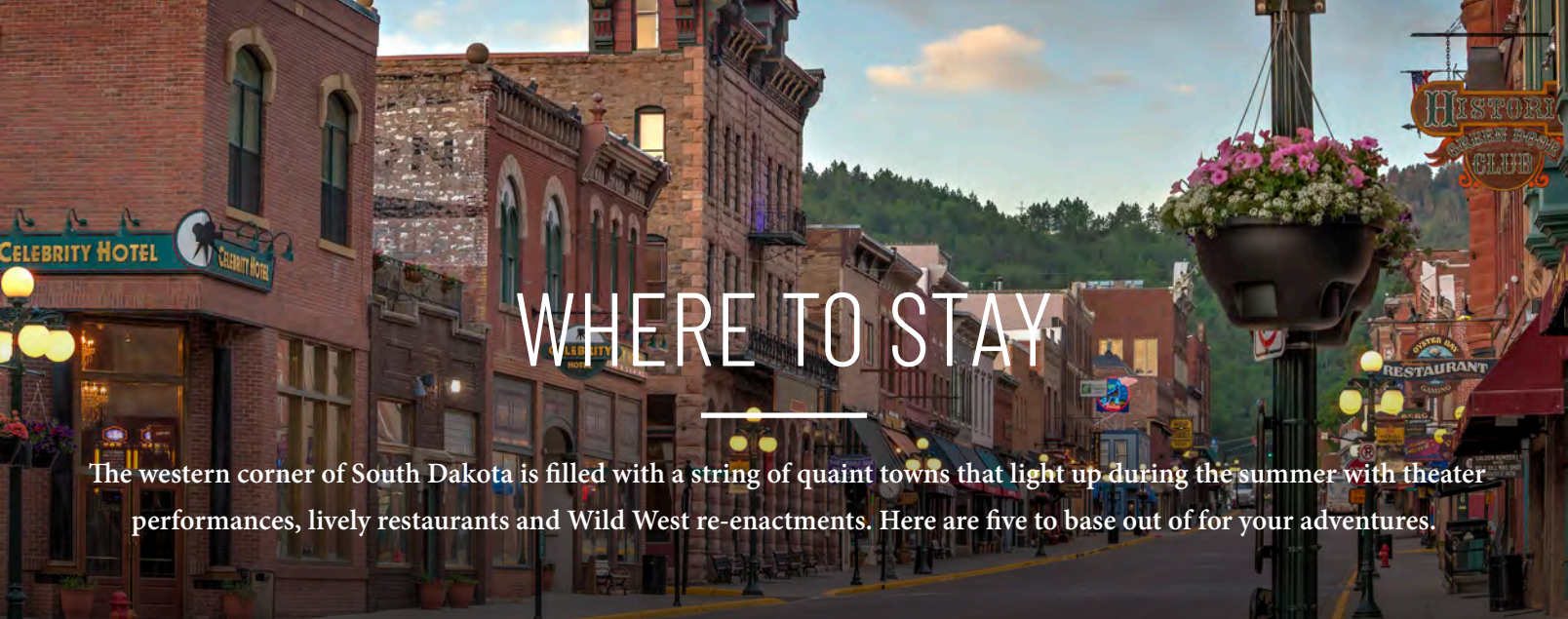
\$0

fee to enter Wind Cave National Park or Jewel Cave National Monument, but paid tickets are required for cave tours

\$10

fee per car to park at Mount Rushmore (free to active duty military). Park entrance is free.

*Fees subject to change



WHERE TO STAY

The western corner of South Dakota is filled with a string of quaint towns that light up during the summer with theater performances, lively restaurants and Wild West re-enactments. Here are five to base out of for your adventures.

HOT SPRINGS

If it weren't for the "wiwila kata," this valley tucked in the southwestern corner of South Dakota would have just been another dusty clearing at the gateway to the Black Hills. Instead, what the Lakota referred to as the "warm waters" gave rise to a mecca of health and hospitality unrivaled in the Midwest.

The sacred healing waters of the Native Americans were discovered by settlers in the late 1800s, and the 87-degree waters flowing from a series of springs quickly became a sought after cure-all. In 1890, Fred Evans built his namesake Evans Plunge over a collection of springs, turning Hot Springs into a destination and the largest resort until you reach California. Today, Evans Plunge is still a mecca for rejuvenation and recreation featuring a collection of pools (refreshed with 5,000 gallons of fresh spring water every minute) and a number of water slides. You can also soak in Moccasin Springs Natural Mineral Spa.

Tens of thousands of years ago, woolly mammoths took advantage of the fresh ponds in the area. More than 61 beasts were trapped and buried only to be unearthed as fossils in 1974. Check out the Mammoth Site to see the sinkhole still riddled with mammoth bones, as well as a museum with a full-sized mammoth.

CUSTER

Just up the road from main entrance of the spectacular Custer State Park lies the town of Custer, a hub for the outdoor attractions surrounding it, including Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Memorial. The historic downtown is a hive of restaurants, shopping and museums, including the 1881 Courthouse Museum housed in an original Dakota Territory Courthouse.

At the museum, you'll discover the history of Custer, which was illegally settled by gold prospectors in 1874. At the time, the Black Hills were closed to white settlement under the Treaty of Fort Laramie, an agreement between the U.S. government and the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho. Conflict between the prospectors and Native Americans led the U. S. government to seize the Black Hills, opening it up to white settlers and leading to the near-overnight growth of Custer to a town of 10,000 settlers. Today, a little more than 2,000 people live in Custer year round.

Sample homemade pies, enjoy chuckwagon suppers and sip coffee at a cafe. In the evening, head to Black Hills Playhouse in Custer State Park for a Broadway-caliber performance. The professional actors put on everything from musicals and comedies to dramas.

KEYSTONE

Take a break from the oversized sculptures of presidents at Mount Rushmore to see the evolution of the nation's democracy through life-sized wax figures of 45 presidents at the National Presidential Wax Museum.

Just three miles from Mount Rushmore, the closest town in the Black Hills to the iconic sculptures, Keystone is a former gold-mining town that offers a ton of activities and 32 restaurants. If you are looking for thrilling adventures, check out Rushmore Tramway Adventures, home to an 800-foot zipline and a chairlift. Or put your putting skills to the test at Holy Terror Mini Golf where a 50-foot steep hillside offers an "elevated" experience.

When you're ready for a new perspective on the area, board the 1880 Train or get a birds-eye view of the area with Rushmore Helicopters, offering aerial tours of Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse Memorial and more.

HILL CITY

Surrounded by towering peaks and lofty pine forests, Hill City is a charming small town with a distinct style.

Find locally owned bed and breakfasts, brand-name hotels, timber lodges, secluded cabins and some of the area's largest campground resorts. Main Street offers an eclectic blend of restaurants, stylish stores, outdoor outfitters, boutique shops and fine art galleries and museums. You'll also find South Dakota wineries and homegrown breweries with unique tasting rooms.

Discover the 1880 Train, a 2-hour, 20-mile ride aboard a historic train that runs between Hill City and Keystone, S.D. Narrated for all ages, the train is popular, so book early. In addition, don't miss the beauty of the 109-mile George S. Mickelson Trail and the stunning scenery along the 12-mile drive to Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

DEADWOOD

Roulette is one of the many games you'll find in historic Deadwood — a Wild West town famous for taking chances. In 1876, fortune seekers took their chance when they came looking for gold and settled in the rough and tumble camp of Deadwood.

Today, visitors to this national historic landmark will find plenty of the Wild West without the danger. Walk the cobblestone-lined Main Street where you'll meet Old West re-enactors who bring history to life. Visit Mount Moriah Cemetery to learn how western legends met their end. It's the resting place of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane.

There's always something new in this Old West town. You'll find plenty of 24/7 casinos, unique shops and award-winning restaurants.