

Dakota Discovery

A visit to South Dakota's western reaches reveals natural, cultural, and quirky wonders

BY ERICA BRAY

Taking the road less traveled often leads to wonderful rewards. When my guide in Badlands National Park turned off a 2-lane paved road onto a single-lane gravel road—one that caused our tiny van to rumble, veer, and skid—I held on to my seat in eager anticipation. We were headed up Sheep Mountain Table, a backcountry setting in the park's highest area. We passed only a few other vehicles on that bumpy journey, which foreshadowed a special (and uncrowded) spot.

The moment I set foot on the mountain, it was easy to understand—and *feel*—why the Badlands remain sacred to the Lakota, the Indigenous people who've called the region home for centuries. I sat quietly, embracing a beautiful silence punctuated only by the wind. I gazed out on an expansive valley of rocky formations and rolling prairie grass that seemed to stretch on for eternity in a soft palette of creams, pinks, purples, and greens. The landscape inspired a stillness within me—along with some embarrassment.

Admittedly, I had up until that moment regarded South Dakota as flyover country, nothing more than the home of Mount Rushmore set amid flatland farms. Being a seasoned traveler who calls the Midwest home, I should have known better. Fortunately, an invitation to attend my first Native American powwow in Rapid City was the catalyst for opening my eyes to the region's wonders. I found Rapid City and its surrounding area to be a *sink-into* destination, rather than one to drive through—or fly over.

Clockwise from top: Dinosaur Park overlooks Rapid City; slender, needle-like granite formations soar at Custer State Park; the Black Hills Powwow celebrates Native American art, music, dance, and cuisine.

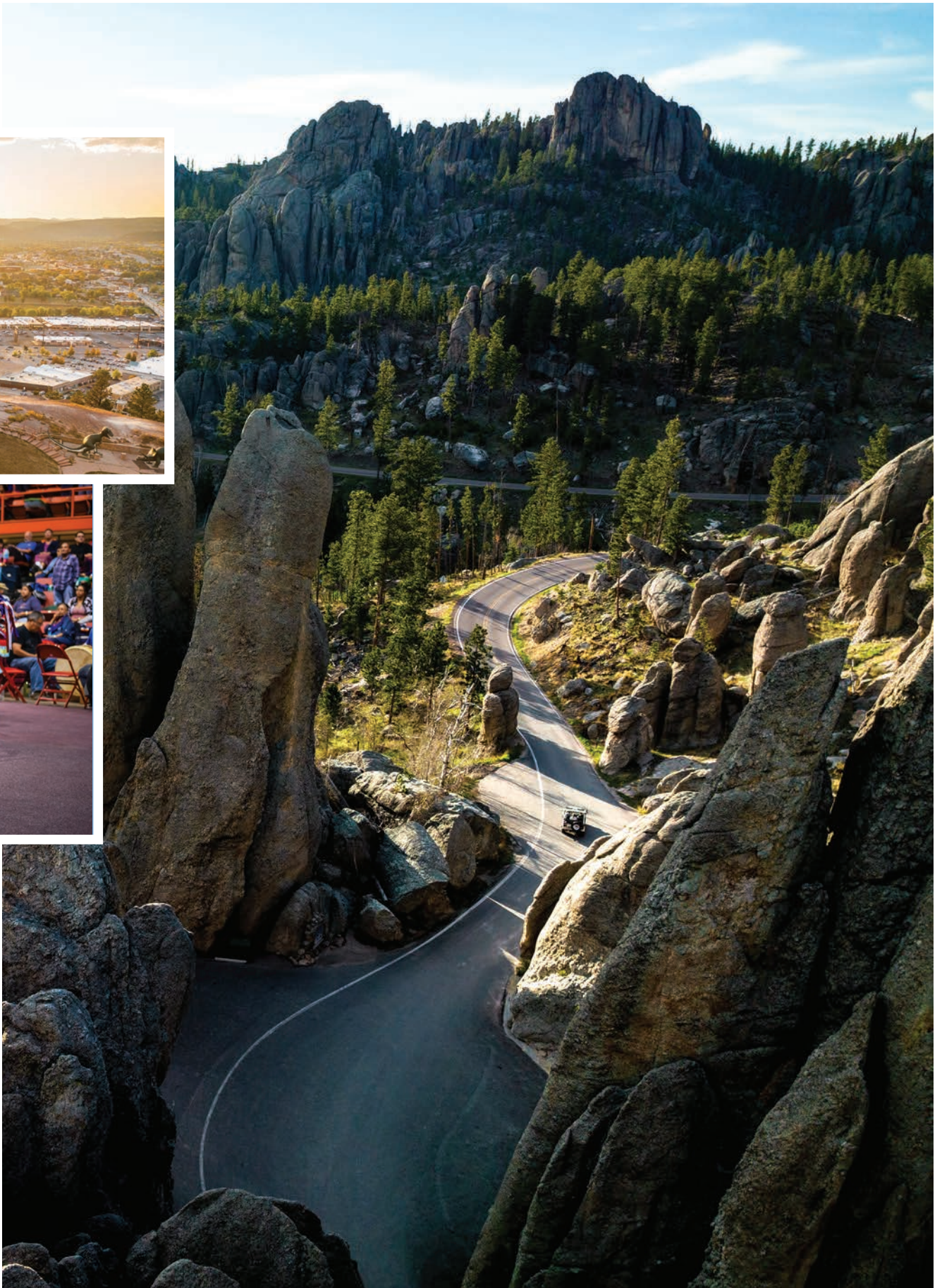


Gateway to Adventure

With a folksy, small-town feel, Rapid City is a great base to explore the 10 notable parks and monuments within a 2-hour drive. You can also day-trip to the nearby towns of Deadwood, a once lawless Western magnet for gold-seekers and gunslingers; Sturgis, host to the world's largest motorcycle rally each August; and Keystone, a touristy hub with gold-mining origins.

Sprinkled throughout Rapid City's walkable downtown is a pleasing mix of restaurants and shops. Some buildings date to the late 19th century, when Rapid City was a supply center for miners seeking gold-rush riches in the Black Hills. Today, you can shop for Native American handicrafts, antiques, and funky vintage clothing on those same blocks. Downtown eateries serve an eclectic range of options, including house-made

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY VISIT RAPID CITY; COURTESY TRAVEL SOUTH DAKOTA (2)





Clockwise from top left: Life-size statues of 43 former presidents greet visitors in Rapid City; a range of eclectic restaurants, including outdoor cafés, welcome diners downtown; in addition to free ice water at quirky Wall Drug, shoppers find cowboy boots, doughnuts, souvenirs, and gift items.

biscuits and gravy, craft brews, spicy vegetable curry, and bison bone ramen.

For me, the town’s most amusing attraction was the reason for its nickname: the City of Presidents. Life-size bronze statues of 43 former presidents decorate many downtown corners. I loved strolling the streets and comparing our heights, especially when my own nearly 6-foot frame towered over James Madison’s 5-foot-4-inch likeness.

Into the Wild

Badlands National Park is about an hour’s drive southeast from Rapid City. Along the way on Interstate 90, dozens of kitschy billboards for legendary roadside attraction Wall Drug advertised everything from cowboy boots and homemade pie to free ice water. It’s a quirky pit stop, if only for a maple-glazed doughnut and some photos.

We drove the 39-mile Badlands Loop Road through the heart of the park, a spectacularly otherworldly combination of eroding buttes, spires, pinnacles, mesas, and prairieland that extends across more than 242,000 acres. The sun cast beautiful shadows here. Ever-changing coloration across the red-striped hills, mustard-hued mounds, and multilayered spires delighted with each twist and turn in the road. I sometimes felt like I was on a Star Wars planet.

Most of the designated scenic overlooks have

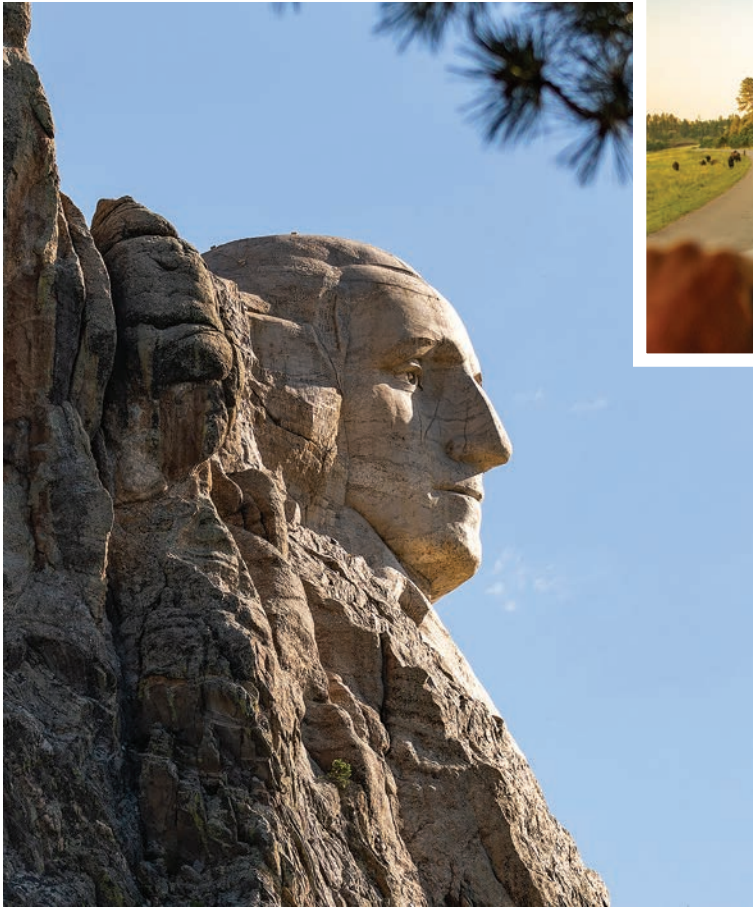
pathways that offer a more intimate experience with this geologically fascinating landscape some 75 million years old. The area holds special meaning for the Lakota, who are deeply connected to this corner of South Dakota. “Our sacred lands are scattered throughout the Badlands and Black Hills,” said Dew Bad Warrior-Ganje, a Cheyenne River Lakota and program manager for the South Dakota Native Tourism Alliance at George Washington University. “[This land] is part of our creation story.”

Black Hills National Forest, just to the west from Rapid City, grandly rises from the plains to reveal 1.2 million acres of ponderosa pine forest, lakes, and reservoirs that are a haven for outdoor enthusiasts. The Lakota’s sacred *Paha Sapa*, or “hills that are black,” are a lush counterpoint to the stark Badlands.

Nearly 1,300 bison share Custer State Park—a 7,100-acre preserve in the Black Hills—with pronghorn antelope, elk, and mountain goats. I spotted some wildlife while driving the 18-mile Wildlife Loop State Scenic Byway, but I wish that I had joined an organized Buffalo Safari Jeep Tour instead of going on my own. The bison were hiding from me that day; an experienced guide would have added color and context, and most importantly, would have known where to find the animals that eluded me.

Well-maintained roads made it easy to travel through the national forest. My jaw dropped as we

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY VISIT RAPID CITY; COURTESY TRAVEL SOUTH DAKOTA (2)



From left: The presidents depicted at Mount Rushmore were chosen for their contribution to the country's founding, expansion, preservation, or unification; bison are among the wildlife at Custer State Park.

drove Needles Highway, a 14-mile journey where massive granite pillars pierce the sky. And Iron Mountain Road—with 314 curves, 14 switchbacks, and 3 mountain tunnels—forced a literal *and* figurative slowing down to enjoy the gorgeous wilderness hugging the route that links Custer State Park and Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

Monumental Discoveries

No trip to the Black Hills would be complete without spending time at Mount Rushmore and the region's other world-renowned mountain sculpture, Crazy Horse Memorial. For me, one was a patriotic must-see, the other an eye-opening education.

At Mount Rushmore, I skipped the ranger-led programs and the Presidential Trail, which provides closer views of the colossal landmark sculpted from 1927 through 1941. Instead, I sat on a bench beneath the heads of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt to snack and people watch. More than 2 million people tour the site annually, and I wanted to soak in the diversity of visitors paying homage.

The soundtrack to my visit was an intermingling of American accents and international languages. One voice I won't forget came

from an elderly military veteran who sidled up next to me while I fixed my gaze on the peak. "It's much more spectacular in person, isn't it?" he said, his deep voice cracking as tears welled in his eyes. He told me that it was his first visit, and it was clearly an emotional one. We both acknowledged the setting's gravitas—something photos can't capture. I stood beside him for a few minutes, and we marveled at the monument together in a shared, reverent silence, before he returned to his family.

Just 17 miles away, I admired a masterpiece in the making at Crazy Horse Memorial. Its origins can be traced to Chief Henry Standing Bear's appeal to sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski, who worked briefly at Mount Rushmore, to create a monument for his people; construction began in 1948. Today it's a symbol for all Native Americans, and if it is ever finished, it will be the world's largest sculpture. Crazy Horse's face was completed in 1998, and carving on his arms and mount continues.

The memorial is entirely privately funded so as to stay fully aligned to the mission without government influence, even if it means slower progress. The project has generated its share of mixed feelings, however, with questions about marring sacred land for a commercial endeavor.

The influence of western South Dakota's Lakota population and its ties to the land weave their way into most experiences here. The Indian Museum of North America at Crazy Horse and the Journey Museum and Learning Center in Rapid City each illuminate Native American culture. I spent considerable time meandering through the exhibits at Crazy Horse, which include art and artifacts from more than 300 Native Nations.

I was most transfixed by the old photographs and paintings that showcased history and cultures that were, unfortunately, glossed over in my early education. In those artworks, I saw a mixture of bravery, beauty, and resilience alongside a sadness that so many Indigenous people experienced



A spectacle to behold, the Black Hills Powwow is a feast for the senses.

as they lost their tribal lands during American expansion. For me, it was educational—and unexpectedly emotional.

Time-Honored Traditions

The Black Hills Powwow provided an even more immersive and enlightening experience. The annual 3-day celebration in Rapid City (October 11-13 this year) brings together dancers, singers, drummers, and artisans from around the world to celebrate Native American traditions. The vibrant spectacle is welcoming and inclusive.

“It’s a celebration for all,” said Warrior-Ganje, who serves as president of the powwow. “We want more people to come and understand what they are seeing and appreciate it.”

To achieve this, a class for visitors, “Wacipi 101,” teaches the history and meaning of the powwow. Coverage of etiquette helped me, and other first-time attendees, navigate the event respectfully.

Stepping into the powwow environment was a full-on sensory experience, especially when observing the dances. I couldn’t look away from the kaleidoscope of colors and feathers. The jingling of beads and bells sewn into the dancers’ regalia intertwined with the beating of the drums, a loud yet meditative sound that filled every inch of space and penetrated my body. I couldn’t help moving to the beat, even in my seat. As one of the Lakota class instructors offered: “You don’t need

to be Lakota to enjoy and appreciate [a powwow]. It’s all medicine to help and heal.”

Children Welcome

During my journey, I sometimes wished my 3-year-old daughter were by my side to experience the many things that would pique her curiosity—including the powwow, where Native American toddlers also performed.

Family-friendly diversions were plentiful, including the Black Hills Central Railroad 1880 Train, a historical steam locomotive that offers 1-hour excursions through the Black Hills; Reptile Gardens, a park that’s home to crocodiles, tortoises, and snakes; and WaTiki Indoor Waterpark Resort, a 30,000-square-foot aquatic playground.

I really pined for my daughter, however, at Dinosaur Park. Situated in the middle of Rapid City on a sandstone ridge, the park boasts 7 life-size dinosaurs—her favorite animal. It’s an offbeat spot with 100-mile panoramic views.

While it wasn’t the spiritual setting I experienced in the Badlands, it did make me smile—who wouldn’t while standing beneath a cartoonishly grinning *T. rex*—and inspired my desire to return to Rapid City.

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