

South Dakota: *Dances With Wolves* Land

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Published: 1993



If you've seen Kevin Costner's frontier film epic *Dances With Wolves*, you've seen South Dakota. But this friendly western state is much more than just vast plains and herds of buffalo.

It's a place where mountain bighorn sheep, elk, pronghorn antelope and, yes, buffalo still roam, and where you can see them, up close, on a jeep safari. Here, the entire Badlands National Park is a hands-on delight. Kids and parents are encouraged to dig out ancient fossils and climb on everything--including beautiful, tortured hills more than 30 million years old. In this area, bizarre caves lurk below seemingly unremarkable surfaces, gigantic skeletons of prehistoric woolly mammoths have been discovered and are on display, and cowboys and Indians still can be seen. And this area is also where the colossal faces of four U.S. presidents are carved on a mountainside, their stone eyes glinting in the sun.

South Dakota is a friendly, fascinating place for a family vacation. On our trip to the Black Hills and environs, my two teenagers were charmed by the state. So were children of all ages we met while traveling—and their parents, too.

Summer is the area's busiest season, so it's wise to book ahead during these months--particularly for a rental car, which is essential if you come to South Dakota by airplane. The state's attractions are spread out, making it virtually impossible to tour without a car. (Note that unlimited mileage deals are difficult to find.)

SIGHTS

Most visitors fly into Rapid City. An unremarkable town, it was founded in 1876, two years after gold was discovered in the Black Hills. (Many visitors are surprised to find that the gently rolling hills here are actually green and covered with masses of fragrant pine trees. However, to the Sioux Indians, their sacred Black Hills appeared dark from a distance.)

In early July you can experience the Black Hills Pow Wow and Arts Expo that brings together some 100 Native American tribes for dancing, singing, arts and crafts demonstrations, fashion shows, and a parade. It makes history come alive for children. Pow Wows are also held on various Indian reservations throughout South Dakota in July and August. Check with the South Dakota Department of Tourism for dates and details.

If you visit during the second week of August, you can't miss the 200,000 or so bikers, mostly on Harley-Davidson motorcycles, who roar into town each year for a rally in the nearby town of Sturgis. The bikes, and the bikers' stunning leather outfits, will make your children's eyes bug out. We saw one biker with a black poodle wearing a biker's leather visor and a black leather coat!

Rapid City is the perfect place to base your family while touring South Dakota. Most of the state's best attractions can be reached on day trips from here.

Mount Rushmore National Memorial, which shouldn't be missed, is about 20 miles south of Rapid City. One of the largest sculptures ever created, it features intricately carved granite heads of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt that are 60 feet high. Open year-round, the memorial is illuminated nightly and admission is free. The visitor center near the base of the memorial provides programs on the history and significance of Mount Rushmore, and a casual cafeteria and adjoining dining room provide tasty food at reasonable prices.

Children and adults also enjoy the nearby Crazy Horse Memorial, a mountain-carving-in-progress of the great Lakota Indian leader. The entrance fee is a bit steep, but you can feel virtuous about contributing to a memorial that represents all the North American tribes that lived in these mountains and hills for more than 10,000 years before the white settlers came. The sculpture, being done privately, was begun in 1948 and isn't expected to be finished until well into the 21st century.

And don't miss Custer State Park. This 73,000-acre park located in the rugged Black Hills boasts one of the world's largest remaining bison herds (about 1,400), plus plenty of elk, bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, mountain goats, and deer. You'll glimpse many of these animals while driving or hiking. Park personnel also lead two-hour open-air jeep rides to view buffalo in their natural surroundings.

We loved hiking in the park, which bursts with wildflowers, streams, and gorgeous terrain. Guided horseback rides are available along old Indian trails through some of the park's most scenic areas. Fishing, swimming and paddle boating are also popular activities, as are hayride/chuckwagon cookouts, which my kids loved. We all enjoyed a 14-mile drive along the Needles Highway Scenic Drive, which wends its way through narrow tunnels and past strangely shaped weathered granite spires. The sights are spectacular.

One of our favorite day trips was to Badlands National Park. It turned into an overnight excursion because we became so mesmerized by the savage landscape. The area's tortured clay peaks with muted bands of color were molded by erosion and weathering over the past 30 or 40 million years. My 14-year-old son remarked that the Badlands look like the sand pictures he made in kindergarten, and indeed it does. It's a spectacular place, made even more incredible by the fact that adults and youngsters alike are encouraged to touch and climb on everything in the park. We took a wonderful one-mile hike on one of the many well-marked trails. It featured a scramble up a rope ladder with 60 rungs, with stunning vistas visible at the top. My children said they felt like Indiana Jones.

Beneath the wild and forlorn scenery of the Badlands lies one of the world's finest Oligocene and Eocene fossil beds. The remains of camels, crocodiles, saber-toothed cats, and three-toed horses no bigger than the average dog have been uncovered, and other bones of mammals that flourished 23 to 37 million years ago are easily spotted. We stopped by a site where three giant pigs, an ancient horse, and a rhinoceros -- all about 35 million years old -- were being excavated. (Inspired by the giant pigs, my family referred to it as "Jurassic Pork.") As my fascinated teens watched, friendly park rangers explained the area's archaeological history and their painstaking excavation procedures.

Start your tour of the Badlands at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center. Nearby, Cedar Pass Lodge, which is operated by the Oglala Sioux Tribe, has a souvenir and gift shop with superior handmade Indian jewelry and other crafts. They are among the nicest such items you'll find in South Dakota.

On the way to or from the Badlands, stop in Wall, South Dakota, a tiny town off I-90 famous for

its drug store. Wall Drug, which covers more than 2 blocks of this Old West town, dispenses 20,000 free glasses of ice water to thirsty visitors each summer. The drug store also purveys the expected pharmaceutical products, as well as jewelry and trinkets, saddles and Western gear, Western art, a covered wagon, a 6-foot-tall stuffed rabbit, and, well... you have to see it to believe it. Parents love the store's coffee, priced at a nickel a cup, and kids love the burgers and ice cream. Wall Drug is definitely an experience well worth an hour or two.

The Mammoth Site in Hot Springs, South Dakota, is an educational experience for the entire family. Discovered in 1974 during excavations for a housing project, it is the site of a large sinkhole where more than 100 prehistoric mammoths are thought to have perished 26,000 years ago. More than 40 beasts have been excavated, and the bones of these giant Ice Age animals are on display. It is the only *in situ* (being left as found) site for mammoths in America.

Another interesting site for kids and adults is Jewel Cave National Monument, located about 13 miles west of the town of Custer near the Wyoming border. It's one of the longest caves in the world, with more than 79 miles of mapped passages. The subterranean chambers gleam with colored limestone and calcite crystals; one formation resembles a huge strip of bacon. Wear a sweater or jacket (the cave stays at a steady 47 degrees) and comfortable rubber-soled shoes for the tour. And arrive by 11 a.m. during the busy summer months. Otherwise, you'll wait an hour or two for the cave tour.

When you're ready for above-ground activity again, head to Deadwood. Clinging to the steep sides of a canyon, this picturesque spot will transport you back to frontier and mining days. Kids love the Old West flavor, and parents who like to gamble enjoy the slot machines and other legal gambling activities that are ubiquitous throughout the town. Wild Bill Hickok was shot and killed during a poker game in Deadwood on August 2, 1876. (He and Calamity Jane are buried nearby on Boot Hill.) His murder and other events are reenacted in staged shootouts and plays that are fun for kids of all ages. Youngsters also enjoy the Deadwood Central Railroad. The train, pulled by an old-fashioned steam engine, chugs through Deadwood Gulch and passes over hills, streams, abandoned mine shafts, and a waterfall.

My children and I also had a bang-up experience having an old-time portrait taken at Woody's Wild West studio, located on Deadwood's main street. The 3-storey building has dozens of interior locales for portraits (bathtubs, saloons, etc.), and you can do yourself up in smashing outfits. If you've always wanted to be a dance hall girl or a desperado, this is your chance. The photos are developed, framed, and ready to be picked up in about an hour.

WHERE TO STAY

Rapid City has a wide variety of hotels and motels, all nice and most recommended by AAA. If you want to avoid the city, book a room in Custer State Park at the State Game Lodge, where Presidents Coolidge and Eisenhower used to stay, or book a log cabin at the park's Blue Bell Lodge & Resort. You'll be staying in God's country.

In the Badlands, your best bet is Cedar Pass Lodge, located inside the national park. Operated by the Oglala Sioux Tribe, it has individual rooms and also larger cabins that are great for families. Reserve cabins early; they are popular and often book up months in advance.

If you want to stay overnight in Deadwood, try the Franklin Hotel—a restored 1903 Main Street

edifice complete with white columns and plenty turn-of-the century ambience. The hotel has a lovely dining room and also offers patio dining in summer.

WHERE TO EAT

If you're a vegetarian or try to avoid beef, you'll have problems dining out in South Dakota. Beef is on every menu. Fast-food chains are also everywhere, offering the usual fare of burgers, chicken, fries, and pizza. Kids especially enjoy the Flying T restaurant in Rapid City, where chuck-wagon suppers (beef and burgers and all the trimmings) are served and a live after-dinner cowboy show is part of the fun. Fort Hays in Rapid City, which is built around the Fort Hays movie set actually used in *Dances With Wolves*, also offers chuck-wagon suppers.

The State Game Lodge in Custer State Park has a Pheasant Dining Room, where buffalo stew and pheasant are specialties. (Kids might enjoy sampling buffalo meat, which tastes like lean roast beef).

In the Badlands, the Cedar Pass Lodge has a full-service dining room that serves excellent breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. For a special treat, try the large Indian tacos, which can be prepared without meat upon request.

In Deadwood, most of the restaurants-cum-casinos have similar menus: burgers and fries, salads, sandwiches.

MORE INFORMATION

- South Dakota Department of Tourism (800-843-1930).
- **Attractions:** Badlands National Park (605/433-5361). Crazy Horse Memorial (605/673-4681). Custer State Park (605/255-4464); Ben Reifel Visitor Center (605/433-5361). Jewel Cave National Monument (605/673-2288). Mammoth Site (605/745-6017) Mount Rushmore National Memorial (605/574-2523).
- **Lodgings:** Cedar Pass Lodge (605/433-5460; \$40/double) . Franklin Hotel (605/578-2241; \$40-\$50) State Game Lodge (\$60) and Bell Lodge (\$95) (800/658-3530).
- **Restaurants:** Cedar Pass Lodge Restaurant (605/433-5460). Flying T Chuck-wagon Suppers (summer only) Pheasant Dining Room (605/255-4541).