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BLACK HILLS ODYSSEY

Discover South Dakota's wild, wild western region

Robert Mims

GSC Highways

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Through the windshield of our trusty 2000 Dodge Ram pickup truck, the Black Hills rose like a continent set adrift on the sea of high desert and grasslands that are the Great Plains. As our 23-foot Salem travel trailer creaked behind us, my wife, Barbara, and I found ourselves slowing to take in the sight opening before us.

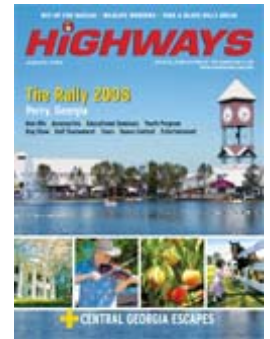
Even our canine companions on this latest of our RVing expeditions grew quiet, content to sniff the alpine air. Callie, our four-year-old border collie, took her usual station between us in the front seat, her nostrils flared. Ranger, our ancient golden retriever, poked his graying muzzle through the open rear window, one paw finding purchase on an armrest.

We were all but alone on Highway 24 that day; other vehicles were miles away, allowing us the luxury of a leisurely pace. It was no great stretch to imagine Native Americans not so long ago riding their ponies back from the hunt, smiling as they returned to their Black Hills home. For millennia, America's first people have lived here—the Arikara, around A.D. 1500, followed by the Cheyenne, Crow, Kiowa, Pawnee and Lakota Sioux in more recent centuries.

The Sioux, thought to have migrated to the region from Minnesota in the 1700s, called it Paha Sapa—the center of the world, an abode of nature deities and a destination for warriors seeking a life-guiding vision from the Great Spirit.

The region changed dramatically as the United States expanded westward. An influx of white miners, settlers and U.S. cavalry disrupted the Native Americans' way of life in the 1870s. But while the Lakota may have lost the Black Hills as a sacred possession, Paha Sapa remains a magical place.

Even entry into the Black Hills is dramatic. Rising from the horizon like a forbidding sentinel is Devils Tower. This striated core of an ancient volcano—best known as an alien landing spot in the 1977 movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—guards the meandering asphalt pathway into South Dakota.



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Beyond the tower lie steadily rising vistas of dark mountains and forests broken only by the lanes of Interstate 90. An hour's drive takes you through Spearfish, a town of 10,000 that spreads along both sides of Spearfish Creek through canyon after canyon. Sixty more minutes, and your view opens into the valley nestling Rapid City, home to some 70,000 people and a gateway to vast stretches of breathtaking scenery and attractions, both natural and man-made.

It had been a long drive for us, roughly 700 miles from Salt Lake City through Wyoming to what would be our home for the coming week. We were happy to see that Rapid City and its surrounding area are home to a number of Good Sam Parks. Check the 2008 Trailer Life RV Parks, Campgrounds and Services Directory to find a resort or click on www.trailerlifedirectory.com.

In addition, the small city offers an urban oasis on a vast frontier. Here you'll find museums, stores and plenty of golf courses, tennis courts and restaurants. But don't get too comfortable; the surrounding wilderness beckons you to explore.

Indeed, the city's southern horizon is largely as it was in centuries past. Seemingly velvet-covered meadows and tree-covered gorges rise into the brooding heart of the Black Hills that dominate the southern horizon. You can almost see the 13,000-acre cattle and horse ranch once run by cowboy-turned-frontier-baron John Harrison Hart 125 years ago.

This was our headquarters for adventure, the place from which we would daily set out to explore in the early morning with steaming mugs of coffee and then return as twilight approached to talk excitedly about what we had seen. Our talk would nightly dwindle to silence, though, as we watched the shadows creep across the Black Hills and give way to evening stars and warm rain.

The first destination on our RVing agenda was Mount Rushmore National Memorial. I had secretly dismissed it as an obligatory touristy sort of diversion, but seeing for the first time with my own eyes Mount Rushmore's soaring portraits in stone of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln drove that cynicism away.

The presidents had been captured in granite perpetuity by hundreds of workers under the direction of sculptor Gutzon Borglum between 1927 and 1941. But as we drove our now-trailerless pickup through winding mountain roads, even that sight paled next to the unfolding panorama of nature: pine forests climbed toward the sky, punctuated by tracts of pasture and patches of prairie populated by deer, buffalo, prairie dogs and birds of all kinds. The air was filled with the perfume of evergreens and wildflowers.

If you see Rushmore, take the time to drive 17 miles southeast through Custer State Park to see another monumental work in progress: Crazy Horse Memorial. Congress lent its support and funding to the work at Rushmore, but this mountain sculpture of Crazy Horse, the renowned chief of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux), was the jealously guarded personal project of a Polish immigrant sculptor, Korczak Ziolkowski.

Work here has been under way since 1948, enlisting generations of Ziolkowski's family and volunteers. Today, it primarily consists of Crazy Horse's nine-story-high face. You can also see the outlines of the rest of the chief's body and his horse. Although dependent on tourist donations, the Crazy Horse site is nonetheless an impressive and educational stop.

Along with its namesake mountain artwork, the site offers an eye-popping Native American museum, gift store, eateries and theaters. Admission is \$10 per person, or \$24 for a carload; proceeds go directly to the Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation to continue the late Ziolkowski's dream.

From towering salutes to monumental heroes, we next found ourselves descending into the bowels of the Black Hills, the aptly named Beautiful Mount Rushmore Cave, miles outside of the town of Keystone. Just one of many Black Hills' area cave attractions, the Rushmore Cave's owners advertise their attraction as accessible to people of all ages. Still, I found a pair of hiking boots and a walking staff to be good choices as Barbara and I joined a guided tour deep inside the mountain.



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It was a climb down, up and through a wonderland of glowing stalactites, mineral pillars and cool chambers. Stalagmites form spires the Vatican would be proud to have in any cathedral, and they are ample reward for the rigors of an hour-long trek that left all of us—young and more mature—glistening and breathing hard.

When we finished communing with this 60-million-year-old cave, a well-stocked gift shop and snack bar awaited to meet the needs of both those seeking to collect mementos and a cool drink or treat.

Another day, and along came another opportunity for serendipity: Bear Country USA. This 250-acre drive-through wildlife park is just outside of Rapid City on Highway 16. For \$13 each (\$11 for seniors), we drove through open habitats cleverly controlled by inconspicuous fences and cattle-guard-like crossings to keep bears, wolves, mountain sheep, deer and buffalo within their respective ranges.

Bear Country USA's owners warn, however, to keep your vehicle's windows rolled up during the 3-mile self-guided tour. The denizens are accustomed to humans, but a playful swipe from the paw of any of the many brown and black bears on site could be deadly.

The habitats are shaped by man but look like the natural settings of the animals that wander this drivable zoo started by Dr. Dennis Casey and his wife, Pauline, in 1972.


One oddity found just 6 miles south of Rapid City showcases a large collection of exotic creatures definitely not native to the Black Hills. In its 70th year as a South Dakota attraction are the Reptile Gardens. A visit here (\$12.50 for adults, \$11 for seniors, \$7.50 for kids) provides plenty of living exhibits of lizards, snakes, toads, giant tortoises, and dozens of alligators and crocodiles. Among them is a Maniac, which the Gardens touts as the largest Australian saltwater crocodile on display in North America, all 1,250 pounds and 15 feet, 8 inches of him.

Old West history, monumental figures, Native American arts, varied natural wonders, both above and below ground, and plenty of the unexpected is what we found in a week's stay. And we only sampled the appetizers of this RVing feast of adventure.

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