

There's more to the Mount Rushmore State than, well, Mount Rushmore

■ BRUCE LEONARD JR.

As RVers criss-cross the country this summer, checking off national parks, famous amusement parks and various natural wonders from their “must see” lists, most will certainly visit South Dakota’s larger-than-life Mount Rushmore National Memorial and nearby Crazy Horse Memorial. But after standing awestruck before these magnificent sculptures — the granite creations of Gutzon Borglum and Korczak Ziolkowski, respectively — travelers often scurry from the Black Hills to other high-profile (pun intended) destinations.

There’s more to South Dakota than these oversized effigies, however. RVers who want to take in more than the big picture, who want to experience the area’s history and wildlife while staying at one of the many convenient RV parks, should visit The Mammoth Site, The Journey Museum, Bear Country U.S.A. and Reptile Gardens.

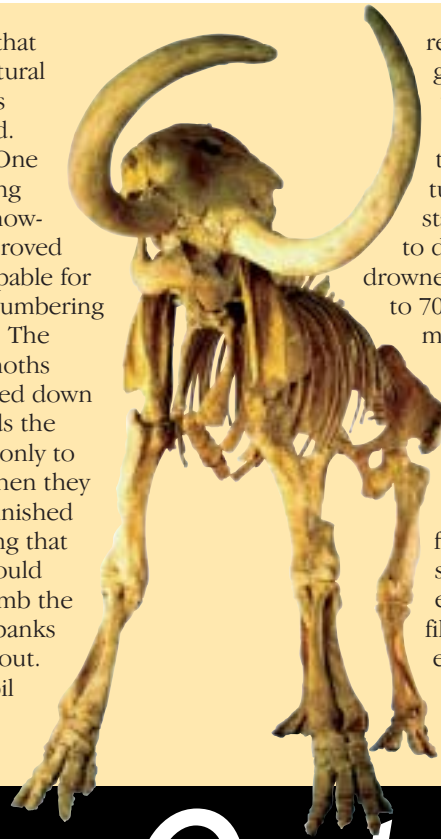
The Mammoth Site

Located in Hot Springs, 40 miles from Crazy Horse and 55 miles from Mount Rushmore (and nearly due south of both), The Mammoth Site once lured now-extinct creatures to its warm climate and waters. Columbian mammoths, which stood 12 to 14 feet at the shoulder and weighed 10 tons, had to consume almost 500 pounds of vegetation a day — and they satisfied their huge appetites on the grasses and plants that grew year-round near the hot springs. Columbian mammoths and Woolly mammoths also quenched their thirst in the

pools that the natural springs created.

One watering hole, however, proved inescapable for these lumbering beasts. The mammoths ventured down towards the water, only to find when they were finished drinking that they could not climb the steep banks to get out. The soil

repeatedly gave way under their weight, and the creatures either starved to death or drowned; for 300 to 700 years, more than 100 mammoths and other animals met this same fate. The sinkhole eventually filled up with earth, entombing the creatures for



Hiding Out in

Bear Country U.S.A. and Reptile Gardens

After learning about what life used to be like in the Black Hills, travelers may want to study inhabitants of the four-legged — and no-legged — variety. The one-two punch of Bear Country U.S.A. and Reptile Gardens should give



wildlife-loving families plenty to peer at — and they’ll see far more than just the area’s native species.

Since 1972, Bear Country U.S.A., eight miles south of Rapid City, has allowed vehicles to drive through its 250 acres of habitat while North American animals graze, lounge, frolic and

growl. Species such as elk, reindeer, bighorn sheep and rocky mountain goats roam the grounds, as do buffalo, wolves, coyotes, foxes, grizzly bears and the world’s largest privately owned collection of American black bears. With 24-hour notice, visitors can request a step-on guide who will provide details about the on-site animals. In the Wildlife Center,

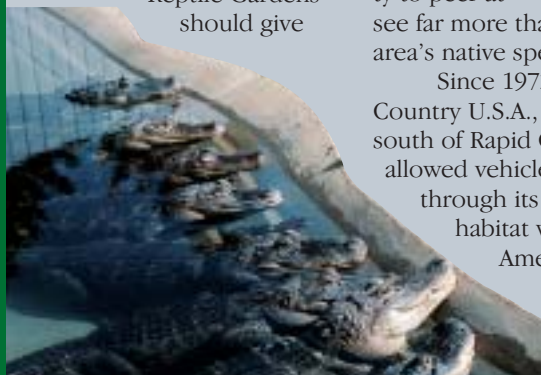


PHOTO: BRUCE LEONARD JR.



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26,000 years, until a heavy-equipment operator leveling ground for a housing development in 1974 struck something that proved to be a mammoth tusk.

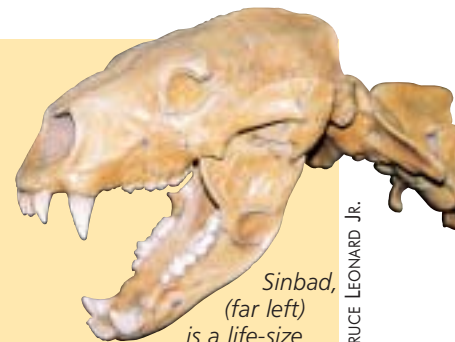
In America today, only The Mammoth Site features

bones *in situ* (bones left as found). A 23,000-square-foot visitor center now covers the sinkhole, which allows guests to view the site and take pictures from walkways that run along the edges of the actual paleontological dig. Scientists carefully excavate an enormous ribcage here, a giant jaw-



bone there, while enthralled visitors speculate what the world was like when these leviathans roamed the Black Hills. An upright, life-size replica of a Columbian mammoth named Sinbad allows guests to stand next to the extinct ice-age creature and see how they measure up.

Yet mammoths aren't the only things that impress visitors. More than two dozen other species have been excavated from the site, including *Arctodus Simus* — and when visitors learn about the size and ferocity of this giant short-faced bear, they are most likely thankful that it's extinct. Children can become familiar with terms such as breccia pipes, taphonomy and



Sinbad, (far left) is a life-size mammoth skeleton replica at The Mammoth Site. Visitors can see an active scientific excavation and take a close-up look at fossils exhibited in-situ (on the original site).

PHOTO: BRUCE LEONARD JR.

cementum in the Junior Paleontologist program, and most everyone will be surprised to learn that camels once were native to North America. Open year-round, The Mammoth Site brings the area's history to the surface.

the Black Hills

spruced up with ponds and waterfalls, guests can watch young bear cubs and wolf pups, as well as some of the park's smaller animals, frolic up close. A tour of the grounds generally takes about two hours, not including time spent in the Bear's Den Gifts and Gallery, the snack shop or the picnic area.

Some animals also wander freely in Reptile Gardens: thankfully, these are mostly birds in the tropical-rain-forest-like Sky Dome. If the other species that give the place its name — black mambas, Cuban crocodiles and American alligators, among them — wandered the grounds, it's doubtful *USA Today* would have named Reptile Gardens one of America's Top 10 roadside attractions,

since the reporter wouldn't have made it out alive. And, of course, the danger — all that caged menace — is the primary appeal of the place.

Posted on the glass that separates the snakes from the patrons are facts about the various species, including how much venom is required to kill a person — .00007 of an ounce, in the case of the Australian Brown snake. Since Reptile Gardens houses the largest collection of scaled or plated animals in the world (more than 200 species and subspecies), visitors can recoil time and again, then be thankful for not encountering these creatures in the wild.

Granted, the tortoise habitat won't make most people long for the safety of their homes, but the alli-

gator and crocodile show will certainly make them grateful for their career choice — no matter what they do — since they could have been a reptile wrangler. Or, for that matter, a piece of chicken! And just in case guests get the idea that Reptile Gardens is all snaps and slithers, the basketball-playing chicken provides one last pleasant surprise hiding out in the Black Hills.

Reptile Gardens hosts a large reptile collection and an exciting alligator and crocodile show (far left). Kids of all ages enjoy Bear Country U.S.A., where they can view animals such as the mountain lion in the wild.



Hiding Out in the Black Hills

The Journey Museum

In Rapid City, The Journey Museum turns the history of western South Dakota into a vibrant learning experience that almost everyone will find interesting. The 48,000-square-foot facility, dedicated in 1997, is open year-round.

Visitors begin their exploration in the Wells

the native peoples and moving on to the gold-miners, homesteaders and opportunity-seekers who settled in the Black Hills, the film prepares museum-goers for the galleries to come.

The Star Room grants visitors a glimpse back into the cosmos before people were around to record it, while the geology and paleontology exhibits explain how pre-Cambrian granite



At The Journey Museum, visitors enjoy listening to storytellers recount the tales and traditions of the Sioux/Lakota culture (left). Murals, models and illuminated story walls guide visitors back in time through the history of the Black Hills region. The museum's many collections of art and objects focus on the area's rich frontier past.

plains. An 1883 map reveals how Rapid City was laid out at the time; a cavalry bugle and the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty remind visitors that the times were not always so peaceful as they are today. The on-site Western Dakota Native Gardens is home to native grasses and prairie flowers, while the Museum Store allows guests to choose from a wide range of souvenirs to help them remember their visit. ■



in displays that make archaeology vibrant.

The Sioux Indian Museum, with its colorful examples of elaborate beadwork, displays of family life and storyteller's tepee, shows how the Sioux (Lakota) con-

quered the plains and traded with numerous cultures once they mastered horsemanship. In similar fashion, the Minnilusa Pioneer Museum allows visitors to walk through exhibits that reveal the madness of the Black Hills gold rush, examine the raw logs and interlocking construction of a pioneer cabin, witness the violence and hardships inherent in frontier life and view the art and artifacts that remain from late-19th century South Dakota.

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Also in the museum, story walls depict through timelines and antiquities the two different perspectives of the European and American Indian cultures that settled on the northern



For More Info

Bear Country U.S.A.,
(605) 343-2290,
bearcountryusa.com

Reptile Gardens,
(800) 335-0275,
reptilegardens.com

South Dakota Department
of Tourism, (800)
S-DAKOTA, travelsd.
com. *CIRCLE 213 ON
READER SERVICE CARD.*

The Mammoth Site,
(605) 745-6017,
mammothsite.com

The Journey Museum,
(605) 394-6923,
journeymuseum.org

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