

## Travel

### Where the West Was Wild

Exploring South Dakota's scenic and historic Black Hills

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The deafening explosion, within inches of my head, sounded more like a cannon than the Colt six-shooter that Jack McCall had fired into the head of the seated gambler. "Wild Bill" Hickok slumped forward onto the poker table — dead. The cards he held fluttered to the floor— pairs of aces and eights, which forever would be known as the "dead man's hand." I wondered whether a time machine had transported me back to Deadwood, South Dakota, and Saloon No. 10 on that fateful second day of August 1876, when I found myself seated across the sawdust-covered floor from Wild Bill and some cronies playing poker.

McCall's sudden and unexplained assassination of the legendary gambler and gunfighter is recreated daily, an event that would permanently define Deadwood's shoot-'em-up reputation. I discovered this, after picking myself up off the floor and dusting the sawdust from my jeans.

Deadwood still thrives on the rowdy character of the gold rush town when legends like "Potato Creek" Johnny, Preacher Smith and "Calamity Jane" walked its muddy streets, gambling and drinking in the boisterous saloons. In fact, on any given day you can still hear all 4-foot 3-inches of Potato Creek Johnny boasting about the gold nugget he had found, the largest in the area.

Impersonators, so historically realistic they seem cloned from the originals, roam the streets, shooting each other as they did in 1876. Calamity Jane, as tough-looking now as then, frequently can be found hooting it up, cracking her whip at some hapless Eastern dude and downing whiskey with the aplomb of any gun-totin' mule skinner.

"She claimed to be Wild Bill's sweetheart," says local historian Mary Kopco, director of the 1892 Adams Museum and House, "but it was pure fabrication on her part. It is true, however, that she asked to be buried by 'her Bill' when she died, and she was." You can see their tombstones on Boot Hill, more formally known as Mount Moriah Cemetery.

The discovery of gold in 1874 by a soldier from General Custer's expedition put Deadwood on the map and ignited the Black Hills gold rush. Prospectors, entrepreneurs, ladies of the evening, swindlers, gamblers, gunfighters, as well as U.S. Marshall Hickok, flooded in, hoping to extract their fortunes from Deadwood Gulch and the miners.

Some historians contend that gold was first discovered as early as 1834. If true, why didn't the gold rush explode across the grassy plains until 40 years later?

In 1887, Louis Thoen found an unusual piece of sandstone at the base of Lookout Mountain in Spearfish, 19 miles northwest of where the later gold strike actually occurred. Cleaning up the stone, Thoen was able to decipher several words carved into the stone: "Got all the gold we could carry. Our ponies all got by Indians. Have lost my gun and nothing to eat and Indians hunting me." It was signed by Ezra Kind and dated 1834.

Authentication efforts have verified that Kind and six others set out looking for gold in 1833 and disappeared. The indigenous tribes at the time had mixed feelings about the white man encroaching on their territory and knew what the discovery of the white man's passion could mean to their lifestyle. It would not be unreasonable to assume that they had dispatched the gold-hunting party and buried the evidence somewhere in the vicinity of Lookout Mountain.

It is absolutely untrue that just because we spent the next couple of days at the Spearfish City Campground and hiked extensively around Lookout Mountain we expected to find a hidden cache of gold. However, the centrally located campground proved to be an ideal starting point for a Spearfish-to-Rapid City tour through the scenic Black Hills National Forest. Spearfish is a big town for the region, population nearly 8,500, and large enough for a Wal-Mart, a Super Kmart and a Safeway. A family of mallard ducks greeted us at the tree-shaded Spearfish City Campground, which remained remarkably cool, despite the 90 F temperature. Its namesake

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"Wild Bill" Hickok and "Calamity Jane," who live on in Western lore, were among the thousands of gold-seekers who were drawn to Deadwood by the gold rush of 1876. That tumultuous time is celebrated every year during Days of '76, which features a rodeo and a parade down a much tamer main street. The entire town, which has many buildings dating from the gold-rush era, is in the National Register of Historic Places. In addition, the Black Hills region boasts a wonderfully wild landscape. Tumbling waterfalls, crystal-clear streams, towering ponderosa pines and colorful wildflowers continue to draw legions of recreation-seeking visitors to Black Hills National Forest. At the Spirit of the Hills Wildlife Sanctuary,

creek, we were told, is one of only two creeks in the world that freeze from the bottom up. It flowed the length of the campground, providing cool wading for tired feet, gentle rapids for tubing and a paved bike-and-hike path.

Adjacent to the campground, the D.C. Booth Historic Fish Hatchery's underwater viewing windows provide entertainment, as well as pleasant strolling on the grassy lawns separating the fish ponds and historical displays, including a railroad car being refurbished to replicate the fish-hauling cars of the past.

Nearby, the 200-member cast of the long-running *Black Hills Passion Play* (in its 64th year) performs Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday evenings every summer. This world-famous production includes many local townspeople and animals.

Curator J.D. Henderson says of the High Plains Heritage Center's extensive collection of cowboy, ranch, farm and Native American artifacts: "We try to show how people survived." They've done a good job, including presenting weekly programs, lectures and demonstrations of early pioneer life.

The Dr. Dolittle of Spearfish, Michael Welchynski, established his Spirit of the Hills Wildlife Sanctuary in 1999 when he relocated from Canada. His mission is to provide a safe haven for injured and orphaned wildlife and a permanent home for unwanted, abused or neglected animals. His current menagerie of about 150 residents includes Tara, a 350-pound Siberian tiger, and her coyote friend; Hercules, a 600-pound male African Barbay lion; and Elroy, a camel who stars in the passion play.

## Spearfish Canyon

Spearfish Canyon/U.S. Highway 14A, which follows Spearfish Creek, is a designated scenic byway. A self-guided brochure is available from the Spearfish Visitor Center. The forces of nature created the canyon when a huge inland sea drained, eroding softer rock from the brown shale and red, gray and buff-colored limestone that today dominates the jagged cliff tops. Four distinct vegetative regions merge in the canyon, a unique combination supporting more than 1,200 plant species.

The wildflowers, grasses and water-loving sycamores, willows and reeds create a habitat to the liking of wild birds. More than 130 species use the canyon, along with wildlife such as white-tail and mule deer, raccoons and mountain goats.

Until the train pushed through in 1893, sightseers could access the canyon only on foot. A devastating flood claimed most of the railroad in 1933, and the present road replaced the tracks. As the road winds up the canyon, ponderosa pines become more dominant, their dark green needles appearing almost black on the distant hills. Native Americans called them *paha sapa*, meaning "black hills."

Just before reaching the town of Savoy, Little Spearfish Canyon joins from the right, at one of the canyon's most spectacular viewpoints, and one of the first places to see the leaves turn in the fall. A couple miles west of Savoy, Little Spearfish Creek looks like a movie setting (in fact, many scenes in *Dances With Wolves* were shot here). Soft green grassy banks follow the tree-shaded creek along a flat shelf, over tiny waterfalls, rapids and miniature swimming holes, until dropping off into Roughlock Falls. The creek, only 3 to 4 feet across, is full of splashing, laughing little bodies, the banks covered with blankets spread with picnics and people under the warm sun.

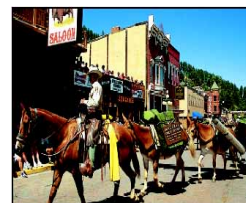
The scenic byway officially ends at Cheyenne Crossing, 19 miles south of Spearfish and eight miles from the town of Lead (pronounced "Leed"), which is home to the Homestake Gold Mine.

Three miles farther, and you're back in Deadwood, but halfway in between, U.S. 385 turns southeast, continuing through the Black Hills toward Rapid City, 42 miles away. About a third of the way down, Roubaix Lake, a national forest campground, is a nice choice for a picnic, a swim, or camping under the ponderosas. (No hookups are available, but several full-service RV resorts are located throughout the Black Hills; check the *2003 Trailer Life Directory*).

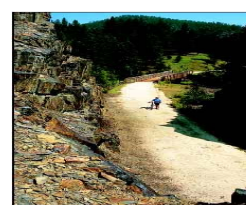
From the lake, we recommend loop trip to explore Rochford and the George S. Mickelson Trail. From the entrance to the lake, turn back north a mile to FS 256, a good crushed-limestone road to paved FS 17. Turn south and follow to Rochford, a community of 10, mostly Bert Mason's family. The town consists of Mason's general store, the gas station, the post office and the Moonshine Gulch Saloon and Restaurant.

Mason's grandfather, a concert violinist and watchmaker, came to the area on vacation in the

visitors especially enjoy observing feeding time for the free-roaming animals, including a Siberian tiger and an African Barbay lion as well as geese, coyotes and a camel who stars in the annual Black Hills Passion Play.



Photos: Bob Difley



### FOR MORE INFO

- Deadwood Visitors Bureau: (800) 999-1876, [deadwood.org](http://deadwood.org).
- South Dakota Tourism: (800) SDAKOTA, [travelsd.com](http://travelsd.com).
- Spearfish City Campground: (605) 642-1340, reservations accepted.
- Spearfish Visitors Bureau: (800) 626-8013, [spearfish.sd.us](http://spearfish.sd.us).
- Wall-Badlands Area Chamber of Commerce: (888) 852-9255, [wall-badlands.com](http://wall-badlands.com).

early 1900s. He became afflicted with gold fever and stayed. Finding little placer gold in the streams, but ruining his hands for the delicate requirements of violining and watchmaking, he turned to the bottle and died an unhappy man. But Bert Mason, except for college and a stint as an air-traffic controller, stayed in Rochford. He bought the store in 1989 and, with his wife, is raising a family of five children.

"I won't get rich," he says, "but I'm living where I want to, doing what I want to. How many people can say that?"

### **George S. Mickelson Trail**

Following the old Deadwood-to-Edgemont Burlington Northern rail line, the 114-mile-long Mickelson Trail passes through four hard-rock tunnels and over more than 100 converted railroad bridges in some of the most scenic parts of the Black Hills. This section of the trail takes mountain bikers, hikers and equestrians through wildflower meadows and wild berry patches along Rapid and Castle creeks between Rochford and Mystic.

With few places to purchase food or find potable water along this trail, it is wise to carry your own and wear appropriate clothing and sunscreen. You can access the trail from 14 trail heads, all with adequate parking for motorhomes. A trail pass and a map can be obtained at several self-service stations for a nominal daily-use fee.

To complete the loop, continue south from Rochford to FS 237, turn left (northeast) back to U.S. 385 at Trout Haven, catch your dinner and cook it in the grassy meadow campground, or turn left to return to Roubaix Lake. A few miles to the south, State Route 44 heads east to Rapid City, where you can rejoin I-90, cash in your gold dust and gaze across the Great Plains where the buffalo still roam.

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