

Black Hills and Badlands, June 2020

Description

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In June of 2020 we shook off the shackles of the pandemic to hit the road to South Dakota for fun in the Black Hills and Badlands.

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  - Custer State Park
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  - Cosmos Mystery Area
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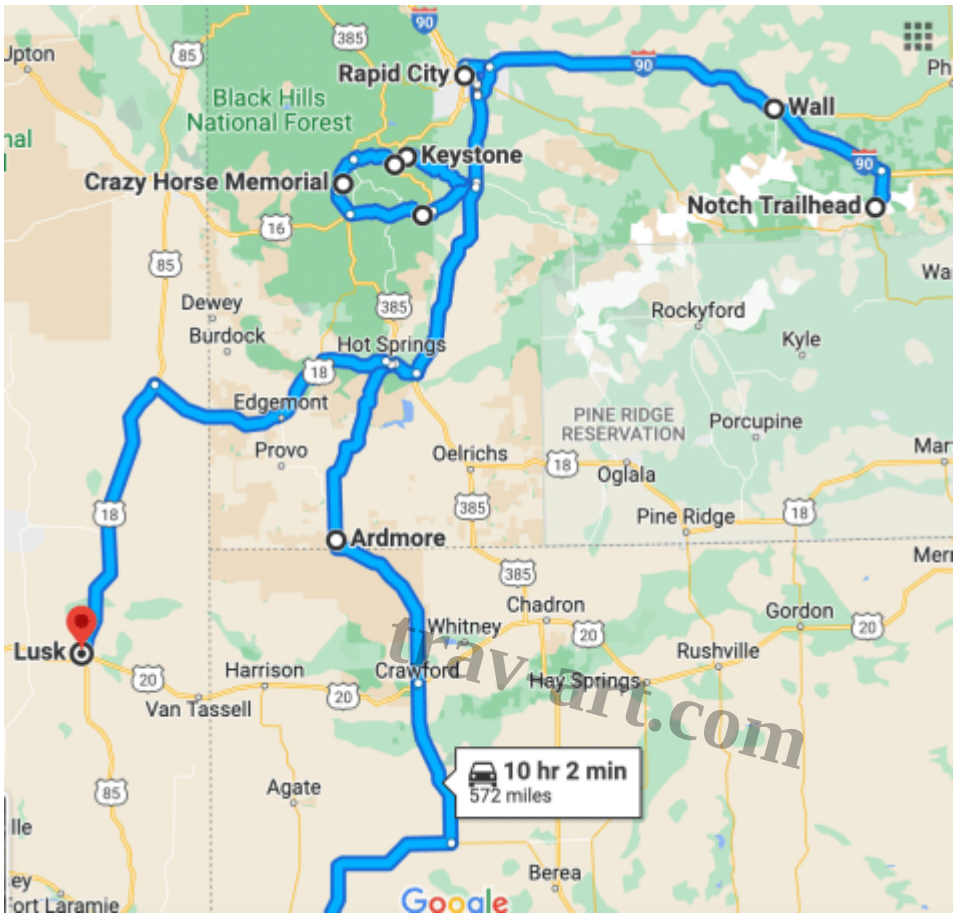

Day 1: On the road to Keystone, SD

Nebraska Panhandle

We chose to take a more easterly route to South Dakota that would traverse the Nebraska panhandle. Since we were departing in the afternoon we wouldnâ??t have much time to stop along the way, but would be able to take in the scenery of the Wildcat Hills, Scottsbluff NM and Fort Robinson areas. Scottsbluff and Fort Robinson would have made interesting stops had we more time (Crazy Horse actually died at Fort Robinson).

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Scenes from the Nebraska Panhandle

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While entering the Oglala Grassland on our way to the South Dakota border, very impressive storm clouds gathered on the horizon. Soon enough the clouds burst and a torrent of rain followed us to nearly the state line. We felt relieved that no tornadoes or large hail were included in the fun.

Ardmore, South Dakota

The first town we encountered in South Dakota was a town called Ardmore. Ardmore is a sad place, falling down and in disrepair. It was once a thriving community in the 1920s, but there just wasnâ??t enough water available for the residents. This was a town that attempted to use dry farming to make up for a lack of precipitation and, like it did practically everywhere else, it failed. Now itâ??s an abandoned town.

What makes Ardmore more fascinating is knowing that when it was abandoned nothing was altered or torn down. Itâ??s now like a time capsule to 1920s-40s America, even if itâ??s in a derelict state.

One thing that Ardmore did bring was a nice rainbow to mark the end of the thunderstorm.



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Rainbow in Ardmore, SD

Continuing on our way we passed through Hot Springs, SD (a neat place we had previously visited) and arrived in the evening at our destination, the **Holiday Inn Express in Keystone, SD**.

We had previously stayed at the Holiday Inn Express in nearby Custer, SD and expected that this hotel would be its equal. It was not. The rooms which were advertised as suites are really one somewhat long room with a half wall divider.

Day 2: Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse Monument, and Custer State Park

One very nice thing about staying in Keystone is that Mount Rushmore is literally just a couple minutes away. But before we would enter the monument we needed some good coffee. We found it in Keystone at a place called **Grapes and Grinds**.

I ordered a chai latte and it was one of the best I ever had. We also played outdoor chess, and hopefully they have painted squares on the chess board since then, because we could not figure out who won despite trying to keep the pieces lined up.

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Mount Rushmore National Monument

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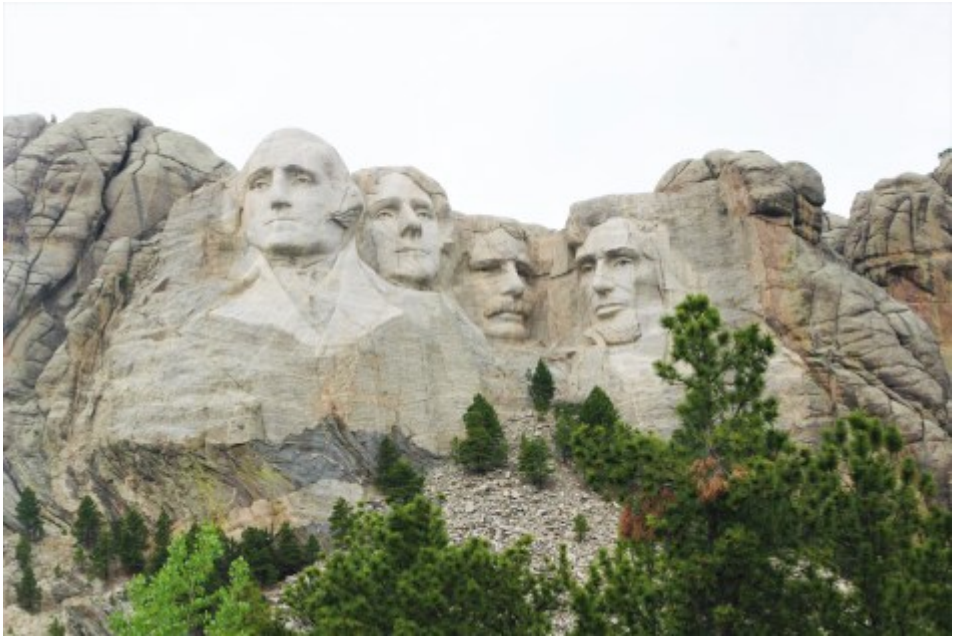

At Mount Rushmore National Monument

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I consider Mount Rushmore one of the must-see sites in the United States for every American.

The sheer scale and intricate details that make up the four presidentsâ?? heads is a testament to the skill of the sculptor Gutson Borglund as well as the entire crew that spent years dynamiting and chiseling away at the granite mountain to create the sculpture.

Normaly I wouldnâ??t want to see a mountain turned into a sculpture, but in case I believe the work was absolutely worthwhile. The creation of the monument also meant a large swath of surrounding land has now been protected from privte development (and I have seen even a mountain goat there).

And certainly those who decry the monument typically live in big cities where thousands of acres of land have been leveled and cemented over to build the conveniences for their daily life.

I admire the work of for what it is: an incredible sculpture that honors our four greatest presidents, then and now. I remember what one ranger said when I visited as a kid, â??If you think anything is impossible just remember Gutson Borglund.â?•

We hiked the loop at Mount Rushmore from the visitor center area and went to the sculptorâ??s studio, where the prototype sculpture shows just how much of Mount Rushmore was left undone when GB died. I actually think that with the exception of an area of jutting rock near Lincolnâ??s face, it is actually a little better in its current state than had it extended farther down the slope.

After visiting Mount Rushmore we drove over to its complement, the **Crazy Horse Memorial**.

Crazy Horse Memorial

With the exception of the facial details, only relatively modest progress has been made on the

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monument in the 30 years since I first visited as a kid. The scale of the work is just so massive that it may be literally centuries before the sculpture is complete at the rate the work is going.

Still it is absolutely worth seeing the work that has been done and you can easily visualize the outstretched arm and horseâ??s mane that may one day complement Crazy Horseâ??s head.



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Crazy Horse Monument and Museum

While the sculpture continues, the museum is where you will spend far more time. The exhibits are interesting and there is a very good art gallery as well. We also were able to join a ring dance with the Lakota following a presentation. Finally we also bought some Lakota crafts and pottery to add to our slowly growing collection of Native American art and weaponry.

Eventually weâ??ll make it to the Battle of the Bighorn site in Montana and we can further discuss the story and legend of Crazy Horse.

After visiting the monuments it was time for lunch and we proceeded south to toward lunch in Custer, SD and Custer State Park.

Custer State Park

Of the state parks that could be national parks, Custer State Park is at the top of the list. Our first stop in the park was the wildlife loop drive. On this loop you will almost certainly see bison (although the herd is not as genetically pure as those in Yellowstone) and the famous feral donkeys that love to greet visitors and beg for food. Youâ??ll also likely see some pronghorn and whitetail deer.

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Wildlife Loop in Custer State Park

After offering up many of our snacks to the burros we exited the loop and drove into the Needles Highway.

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Needles Highway

Youâ??ll see spires of granite and pass narrowly between them as you slowly progress along the highway. Take the pullouts to enjoy the view before entering narrow tunnels and finally getting a great view of Mount Rushmore upon exiting the park. If you enter the park on the Needles Highway you wonâ??t see Mount Rushmore, so keep that in mind.

Finally it was time for dinner and we really only had one place in mind. Weâ??ve been to brewpubs all across the country from the mountain west to California, to New England, to the Southeast and Florida, but the very best in our opinion is in Rapid City, SD.

Rapid City

Firehouse Brewing Company

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Firehouse Brewing Company patio

Firehouse Brewing Company is in an old firehouse. The beers are terrific, the food is terrific, the atmosphere is cool, the staff is fun and friendly, and overall itâ??s just a great place to end the day. Strangely, the day we were there a demonstration passed on the street behind us as we sat on the patio (I guess that happens even in Rapid City) but the atmosphere of the restaurant made it seem inconsequential.

Day 3: Cosmos Mystery Area, Badlands National Park, Wall Drug

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We started the day early to ensure we had time for everything we planned to do that day (which is always a lot). Just a short walk from our hotel was a place to eat breakfast at the **Railhead Family Restaurant**.

The breakfast here was a little slow (they actually messed up our order at first, but oh well) but the food was pretty good. I would say it was certainly better than a Dennyâ??s but not among the best we ever had.

Cosmos Mystery Area

For kids, I canâ??t think of too many more fun experiences in the Black Hills than the Cosmos Mystery Area.



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Outside the Cosmos Mystery Area

I went here as a kid and wanted to take my kids knowing that unless things were dramatically different they would love it. They did. Theyâ??ll spend all their time trying to figure out how you are appearing to walk uphill while going downhill and vice versa. The staff was also very nice and really engaged with the kids well. They donâ??t allow photographs inside to avoid giving away any secrets.
I actually think itâ??s a combination of a large subterranean region of heavy rock that does create a gravitational anomaly (youâ??ll see trees growing sideways), but more importantly the intentionally angled construction in use on the site.

Following our time at the Cosmos, we started east on I-90 for the Badlands.

Badlands National Park

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Badlands National Park

The Badlands are a geologically fascinating area of South Dakota that emerges out of the prairie and extends for dozens of miles in every direction. Entering the park from the eastern entrance we stopped at the Notch Trailhead and hiked a few miles up the trail, traversing the cliffs and the ladder until at last the 100F heat was too much for my kids and we turned back.
The Badlands are like many similar parks where the colors really come out at sunrise and sunset, and itâ??s generally easier to see wildlife at those times of day too. I also think itâ??s a place where you can really appreciate just how beautiful the tallgrass prairie is, and get a glimpse of the America of the past centuries before development changed the landscape.

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We were particularly luck because we saw bighorns and a herd of bison during our journey through the park from east to west. I recommend traveling this direction so you can start with a good hike and finish across the highway from Wall Drug.

Wall Drug



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Wall Drug

Itâ??s amazing how you see things as a child versus as an adult. When I was a kid I went to Wall Drug and thought it was huge and really fun. Now as an adult I see itâ??s really a touristy place, and quite honestly tacky too, but kids love it and itâ??s always worth a stop.
After buying some souvenirs and posing on the giant jackalopes we headed across the street for what we hoped would be a good lunch.

After returning the Keystone for the evening we were able to find a better restaurant called **Cruizzer**s at actually a lower cost in walking distance to the hotel.

The pizza and cheesebread at this Italian restaurant are both good. It certainly wasnâ??t among the best places I ever ate, but it was a substantially better experience than lunch. The staff was nice as well.

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Day 4: 1880s Train and Hill City

Our last day in the Black Hills took us to Hill City. Our 7-year-old Evan is an absolute train fanatic, but even if your love of trains isnâ??t as deep as his, the 1880s train is still a great experience.

1880s Train



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1880s Train

The 1880s Train travels between Hill City and Keystone, SD (ironically we were taken right back to where we started in the morning before the return trip). The train ride is fun and relaxing and you get to see some good scenery along the way. The train depot in Hill City also has a model train exhibit.

After riding the train we stopped at a winery that we had visited years prior.

Prairie Berry Winery

This is certainly a place for adults to enjoy their time and sample wines. We used to live in Californiaâ??s wine country and every once in a while we would go to a local winery for tastings and to buy some wine. We like the wine at Prairie Berry and actually signed up to have wines delivered to us every couple months. We just need to work harder on getting it all consumed.

After enjoying the wine we went to **Desperados Cowboy Restaurant**, a place we remembered from a previous trip to the Black Hills. It didnâ??t disappoint the second time.

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Squid dog at Desperados Restaurant

This is a fun, western-themed restaurant in Hill City. We enjoyed the food and ambience both times. They really did slice Evanâ??s hotdog up into a squid and he really didnâ??t know what to make of it other than it was funny.
On our previous visit we realized my older son Daniel had a tick on his leg from hiking earlier in the day and I had to remove in it the restroom. But we got it taken care of and now itâ??s just one of those memories we have now.

And with that our journey to the Black Hills was over. Weâ??ll always have more to do and more reasons to come back over the years. Heck, I might even consider moving there someday if I find a nice spot of land to build on.

Category

1. Travel

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