

There's gold in the Black Hills

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At one time or another, almost everyone makes a pilgrimage of patriotism to Mt. Rushmore.

While much of South Dakota is eminently forgettable, there are lots of things to do and see in South Dakota's Black Hills. So, once there, don't just gaze at the massive stone faces of the presidents and leave. Devote some time to take in all that the Black Hills have to offer.

The Black Hills have been revered by Native Americans for hundreds of years; and, in the mad rush of European-Americans into the West, the area was largely left to the natives, as the newcomers sought out the fertile plains for farms or pressed on farther west. In 1868, a treaty with the Indians precluded white settlement of the Black Hills "forever."

In 1874, however, George Armstrong Custer led an army expedition into the area that discovered gold; and it turned out that "forever" meant about six years. Ironically, Custer's discovery directly contributed to the Indian conflicts that resulted in Custer's death two years later at the Battle of Little Bighorn — the haunting site of which can be visited on

the way to the Black Hills.

Today, tourism is the biggest draw to the Black Hills, and Mt. Rushmore, of course, is the biggest draw of all.

If you haven't been there in a while, you may find new things to see. This was our third trip to Mt. Rushmore, and there was plenty that was new to us. First off, the new parking garage — and the \$11 parking fee — was new, but then, so was the impressive Grand View Terrace and the Avenue of Flags. Some very substantial improvements have been added in recent decades.

Amidst all the museums, history, gift shops, and viewing opportunities, there is a little trail I'd like to tell you about. It isn't the sort of trail I usually write about in this column, but it's something that you won't want to miss. Mt. Rushmore's Presidential Trail is only 0.6 mile, but it offers surprisingly close-up views of the presidential sculptures and entirely different perspectives of the presidential visages.

The trail loops around from the spacious stone plaza of the Grand View Terrace and passes through an attractive pine forest directly beneath the famed presidential likenesses. The trail is easy, but there are hundreds of stair steps involved, so be prepared.

A ranger suggested that the trail is best transited in clockwise fashion because there are fewer steps back up at the end of the walk. Of special interest is the granite rubble carved away from the mountainside, much of which still bears the sculptors' tool marks. The trail can be walked without a guide, but audio-guides are available. Informational signs dot the entire route.

Whether coming or going from Mt. Rushmore, be sure to take in the beauty, forests, buffalo, and prairie dogs of the adjacent Custer State Park. A drive through the park is a wonderful trip; and there are also many miles of "real" trails, including the Centennial Trail that transits the entire length of the park. For cyclists, there is also the bicycle-friendly George S. Mickelson Trail running south from Deadwood for 108 miles on the old Burlington Railroad Route.

Immediately to the south of Custer State Park is Wind Cave National Park. The first time we were there, we had a 14-month-old toddler; and our second child was due only two months in the future. In view of those circumstances, we didn't make the trip through the cave; but on this visit, we had no such constraints, so we were able to tour one of



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Daily "shootouts" take place on the streets of Deadwood in South Dakota's Black Hills.

the largest and most elaborate cave systems in the world.

We spent a week in South Dakota; and our base of operations was near the historic town of Deadwood. This frontier gold-rush town was made famous — or more accurately, infamous — by the cold-blooded murder of famed gunfighter Wild Bill Hickok, an incident reenacted in Deadwood four times daily, May through October.

Additionally, from Memorial Day through Labor Day, three infamous shootouts are also reenacted daily on the streets of Deadwood. When the gold ran out, Deadwood was in danger of becoming a

ghost town, but designation as an historical site — and legalized gambling — revitalized it.

Last year, *True West* magazine named Deadwood "Best Old West Gunfighter Town."

We set aside one day to venture across the state line into nearby northeast Wyoming to visit another of those icons of the West that is on most people's must-see list: Devils Tower National Monument. Native legends notwithstanding, the tower resulted from a volcanic magma intrusion that solidified into columnar basalt, a phenomenon also frequently observed

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