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# TRAVEL

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THE DAKOTAS

## LEGENDS OF THE HILLS

Story by SIMON PETER GROEBNER • Star Tribune • Photo by M. SPENCER GREEN • Associated Press

Crazy Horse is staring down four presidents of the United States.

I've boarded a battered yellow school bus that will bring tourists to the base of the mountain where the legendary Lakota leader is being carved in granite — a massive work in progress going on decades. “The purpose of this monument is to honor all North American Indians,” our otherwise jocular bus driver intones.

We disembark, and I peer up at the carving, which is an active construction site. From here, the stark details of Crazy Horse's face are perfectly clear. At 70 feet high, that visage is much larger than any of the presidents on

Mount Rushmore. The outlines of the future completed monument — his body, his flowing hair, his horse — are faintly discernible.

But what strikes me most is that Crazy Horse is fixing his eagle-eyed gaze, and gesturing, in the general direction of the more famous Rushmore, some 15 miles to the east across South Dakota's Black Hills. And I don't think that's by accident.

Crazy Horse fiercely resisted U.S. Gen. George Custer's advance into the sacred Black Hills in the 1870s. The Lakota would eventually lose their land, and both men their lives — Custer, famously, at Little

Bighorn, and Crazy Horse a year later in military custody. But today the Crazy Horse Memorial, funded only by donations, with its sprawling visitor center and museum, has joined Mount Rushmore as a busy mainstream attraction in these vibrant Hills. Ironically, the closest town to Crazy Horse is a motel-filled crossroads known as Custer — and the area is dominated by the wilderness of Custer State Park.

But at the memorial, the warrior's stony glare reminds me that even in our shared American history, even here in patriotic South Dakota, there is more than one side to the story.

See **HILLS** on G4 ►



Scenes from South Dakota's national-caliber Custer State Park: Sunday Gulch frames a view of the Black Hills, with a hiking trail that consists of a creek bed, small waterfalls and rusty metal railings. A one-bison "buffalo jam" stops traffic on Iron Mountain Road. The sky near the park's southern entrance glows pink after sunset.

Photos by SIMON PETER GROEBNER • Star Tribune

## LEGENDS OF THE HILLS

### ◀ HILLS from G1

My experiences of the Black Hills — a mountain range with more character than elevation — are forever colored by nostalgia for trips with the Boy Scouts and family in the 1980s, followed by a pre-college solo sojourn. When I make the epic day's drive across South Dakota to the Rapid City area every few years, I think about what has changed, and what hasn't.

Crazy Horse wasn't on our to-do list back then; the sculpture started by Korczak Ziolkowski in 1948 really began to take shape about 25 years ago. The work continues indefinitely. But Rushmore has always been the core attraction. On my last visit there in 2014, the hike to the base of the presidents was still impressive, though the charming midcentury cafeteria had been replaced by the more formal Avenue of Flags. I steer clear of the crowds this time around.

### The wilds of Custer

Leaving the memorial, I instead amble toward the state park on the 17-mile Iron Mountain Road, with its switchback turns, pigtail bridges and tunnels that afford surprise distant views of Rushmore. A popular way to get around

nowadays is via rental UTV (utility terrain vehicle), maybe because your camper or quad cab won't work for park roads and tunnels that were made for the Model T.

Custer is truly a national-caliber state park, thanks to its high-winding scenic drives and a safari-like Wildlife Loop starring pronghorn, bighorn sheep, prairie dogs, burros, the elusive mountain goat, and around 1,400 bison. Bison numbers have definitely rebounded in this century; when I was a kid I thought they were mythical or extinct. Today it isn't a complete trip to Custer without a "buffalo jam," the phenomenon where bison wander onto the road, blocking cars from both directions until the surprisingly dangerous beasts decide to move on. Custer's bison are also the main attraction during the annual Buffalo Roundup on the last weekend of September.

There are no buffalo jams for me on the Needles Highway, a throwback to the days (1922, in this case) when American park planners tried to spark public interest in the outdoors by building motorways right through and on top of natural wonders, rather than going around. The result is a 14-mile drive like no other, ascending hundreds of feet into the

"needles" — soaring spires of rock that first gave sculptors the weird idea to carve men's heads in mountains. Like the landscape answer to Georgia O'Keefe's sensuous modern art, these delicate needles give the more famous formations at nearby Badlands National Park a run for their money.

At the zenith of Needles Highway is the most heavenly spot in all of Custer: Sylvan Lake Lodge, with its alpine lake, campground and network of trails. At sought-after hilltop cabins, families gather early at picnic tables for the long sunset view. The day is already winding down at Sylvan's rare swimming beach, with its clean, cool black water dammed in by yet more (climbable) needles. It's definitely a spot to get out of the car. The most popular hike in the area is the climb to 7,244-foot Black Elk Peak, but with a few hours of daylight already remaining, I opt for the less-trod Sunday Gulch Trail, starting behind the Sylvan Lake dam. Entering the trail through a narrow cleft in the rocks, I am thrust into a stony sculpture garden of the gods.

After an hour's descent into the gulch, I encounter a daunted helper helping her exhausted mother up in the other direction. The teenager warns me

that they've been stuck in the gulch for three hours. I worry that I've committed a cardinal hiking error: starting too close to sundown.

My path soon bottoms out in the darkened woods around Sunday Gulch Creek, and I realize the return will be a climb up through the actual creek bed. Fortunately the creek is down to a trickle — thank you, drought of 2021 — so I ascend easily with the help of rusty metal railings, stopping for countless little cascades along the way. I take one wrong turn near the end into a steep, bewildering cul-de-sac, but voices below guide me out, in plenty of time for dusk.

### Into the past

For this solo June trip, I'd checked into a newly built motel-style lodging at the Firehouse Campground, a cozy RV park with a fire-engine theme, in the middle of a burgeoning brewery and winery district outside the Western-kitschy tourist hub of Hill City. Thanks to the shortage of tourism workers just about everywhere this summer, the breweries are closed by nightfall when I pull in from a day in the Hills. I do find authentic German schnitzel, spaetzle and dumplings at the vintage-luxe

(yet cash-only) Alpine Inn in Hill City — so good, I return for brunch. Service in the Black Hills is generally warm, with many people making a point of using my name.

Another new-to-me feature of the area is the George S. Mickelson Trail, a 109-mile stripe of crushed limestone that connects the entire region, from the HBO-famous mining town of Deadwood in the north, through Hill City and past Crazy Horse. At a roadside bike stand, a bearded mountaineer named Joe sizes me up with an arm on my shoulder, and declares that I should use his own personal mountain bike, for \$20. So I take his Fuji on a three-hour ride through unfettered countryside, uphill the way out and downhill the way back. Back in town, I spot Joe walking to get beer with my \$20. He offers me one if I'm still around later.

But later, I want to see more of the Black Hills of my youth. So I hit the road for a sunset drive through the so-called Southern Hills. In Hot Springs, more than 35 sandstone buildings make for what may be the region's prettiest town. Of all the family-oriented tourist traps in the Hills, and there are many, my favorite place in the world was once Evan's

Plunge, an indoor, chlorinated swimming pool fed by a natural spring. It's still there in Hot Springs, looking smaller than I remembered, with a Native-themed mural outside.

It's time the drive back through Custer State Park at twilight, for the grand finale of my trip. That's because in fall 2014, I took a spontaneous turn down the Wildlife Loop Road, only to be confronted by a gang of elk, its sole buck loudly corralling a lineup of ewes in the heavy evening mist.

No such luck this time around, but humans are sparse, the evening sky turns pink and I do spot several solo bison, grazing quietly in the dim light. At dark, I brake for an entire herd of deer in the road — or were those pronghorn? It's getting too late to be driving around Custer.

On the way back to Hill City, I notice a brightly illuminated mountainside alongside Hwy. 385. Pulling over, I realize I'm back where I started, at the Crazy Horse Memorial. The gates are closed, but the icon stays lit up through the night — silently keeping sentinel over the ever-changing land of his people.

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