



## Black Hills road trip

# Mount Rushmore may be the big attraction, but South Dakota is loaded with sights worth seeing

By Alan Scher Zagier The Associated Press

CUSTER STATE PARK, S.D. — The wild burro wouldn't take no for an answer. We had already encountered grazing pronghorn antelope, packs of wild turkeys, prairie dogs and enough bison to render us downright blasé when yet another of the enormous beasts emerged on our four-day trip through the Black Hills of South Dakota.

But the snack-seeking donkeys were a tourist's dream, moseying up to the car window for a bite of carrots, Cheetos or whatever else was handy.

The feeding frenzy is common in these parts: Moments later, a particularly assertive burro blocked our path down Wildlife Loop Road until we turned over more foodstuffs.

The vacation was ostensibly a chance to see Mount Rushmore, the civics book staple that a new generation is likely more familiar with from its featured role in "National Treasure: Book of Secrets" (just as an earlier generation saw the monument portrayed in Alfred Hitchcock's "North by Northwest").

Joined by my 12-year-old son and our year-old puppy, we conceived the 900-mile drive from Missouri to South Dakota as a guys-only getaway, a journey to rid our minds of the mutual stress involved in planning Jonah's upcoming bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage.

Meeting the four granite presidents may have been our goal, but we quickly realized that so much more than Rushmore awaited.

### Where the prairie grows wild

The first stop was Badlands National Park, an otherworldly landscape of sweeping buttes, endless canyons and gaping gorges. The park is easily accessible via a 32-mile loop off Interstate 90, fewer than 100 miles from the heart of the southern Black Hills.

The frontier town of Custer, site of the first gold discovery in the hills and a 20-minute drive from Rushmore, was our home base.

Custer is one of several towns convenient to the national monument, and it scored points for its many restaurants, well-stocked market, convenient access to the 109-mile George Mickelson cycling trail (a converted rail line that cuts a largely flat, north-south path through the mountains) and — unlike some other nearby towns — its noticeable lack of tawdry T-shirt shops.

Thirty miles south of Custer is Hot Springs, a town where a planned housing development was scrapped 34 years ago after excavators discovered a mammoth burial site.

The prehistoric elephants flocked to the area when its limestone deposits dissolved in water bubbling up from underground springs. Lured by the promise of food and drink, the Ice Age mammoths slid into the water, unable to escape.

The Mammoth Site of Hot Springs, still an active paleontological dig, now hosts scientists and researchers from across the world, as well as curious tourists. More than 100 tusks from Columbian and woolly mammoths have been found.

Just down the road is the Evans Plunge, where a section of the warm water springs that give the town its name were bought almost 120 years ago by entrepreneur Frederick Taft Evans to lure visitors drawn by the water's healing properties.

A handful of spas remain nearby, but the Evans Plunge is now a water park with an indoor and outdoor swimming pool, slides, rope swings, floating (plastic) alligators and more. There's an observation deck for parents who don't want to swim, as well as a hot tub and health club for adults.

Any trip to the area should include time spent exploring the rich heritage of the Lakota Sioux Indians, who in 1877 signed a treaty ceding the Black Hills to the United States, an agreement that nonetheless didn't prevent an attack 13 years later in the Wounded Knee Massacre near the Pine Ridge reservation.

### Monument in making

Much of that history is on display at the Crazy Horse Memorial, a massive mountain carving and 60-year work in progress that once complete — if ever — will dwarf Mount Rushmore, which inspired its creation.

As the Rushmore carving neared completion, Lakota Chief Henry Standing Bear realized that his people deserved their own monument. For that task, he selected sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski, who assisted Rushmore creator Gutzon Borglum and came to Standing Bear's attention after winning first prize in a contest at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

"Will you carve us a mountain so the White man will know the Red man has great heroes too?" the chief asked Ziolkowski.

The project would consume the Boston-born sculptor of Polish descent. He moved to the mountain's base and worked on the memorial continuously with his wife, Ruth, and their 10 children until his 1982 death.

At nine stories high, Crazy Horse's head — the only complete portion of the project — is bigger than the four presidential busts featured at Mount Rushmore. So is the scope of Ziolkowski's vision of the property, which one day could include a university and medical training center.

For now, there's plenty to explore at the site, including a cultural center stocked with art, religious icons and tools (we particularly enjoyed the Lakota medicine man's rattle made from a buffalo scrotum and filled with pebbles).

At dusk, the memorial hosts a musical laser light show combining New Age and classical songs with images detailing the monument's history and continued efforts under Ziolkowski's widow and seven of the 10 children.

Twice a year, the public can watch nighttime dynamite blasts at the memorial. And an annual Volksmarch (a noncompetitive group fitness walk), held the first full weekend in June, allows visitors to literally touch Crazy Horse's head.

#### Those are big nostrils

Then there's Rushmore, a place the textbooks and even Hollywood films can't do justice from afar.

Cynic or romantic, war critic or die-hard patriot, the grandeur is breathtaking. Awe factor aside, the memorial also offers insights into presidential history likely to impress even the most die-hard trivia buffs.

For instance, to portray Teddy Roosevelt's everpresent eyeglasses, Borglum carved a narrow curvature under each of the former president's eyes. And George Washington's straightahead gaze was no accident — his upright chin was carved as a testament to his upright character. **If you go**

**BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK:** Entrance in Interior, S.D., about 80 miles from Rapid City; [nps.gov/badl](http://nps.gov/badl) or (605) 433-5361. One-week pass costs \$15 per carload. Open 8 a.m.-5 p.m. through Oct. 11. No additional fee for backcountry camping.

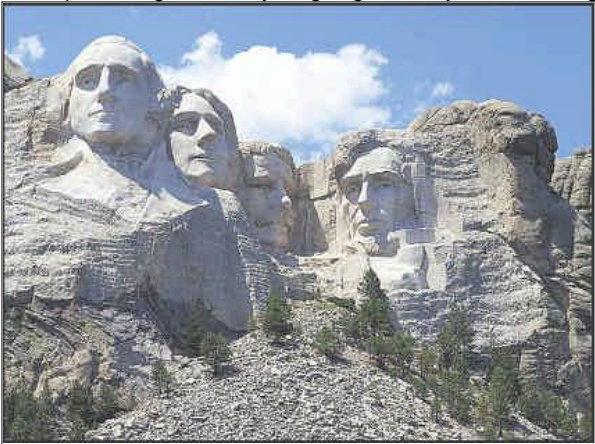
**CUSTER STATE PARK :** Near Custer, S.D., along U.S. Highway 16A; [sdgfp.info/Parks/Regions/Custer](http://sdgfp.info/Parks/Regions/Custer) or (605) 255-4515. A one-week pass costs \$12 per carload. Camping fees (including cabins) are extra. Check the park visitor center for daily activities, including educational programs and guided tours. Don't miss the park's scenic drives along Needles Highway, Iron Mountain Road and the wildlife loop.

**MAMMOTH SITE OF HOT SPRINGS:** Hot Springs, S.D., on Highway 18 bypass; [mammothsite.com](http://mammothsite.com) or (605) 745-6017. Open 8 a.m.-6 p.m. through Labor Day. Adults, \$7.50, children 5-12, \$5.50. Call in advance to reserve space in the junior paleontologist program for children 4-13.

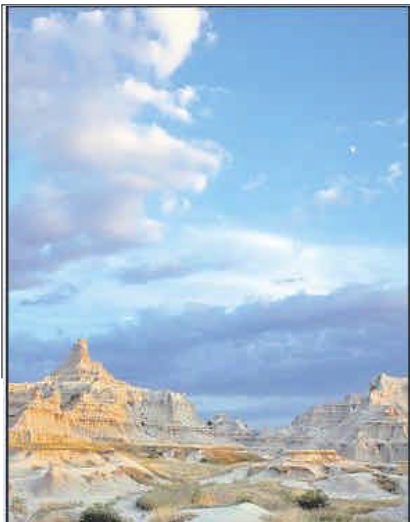
**EVANS PLUNGE INDOOR WATER PARK:** 1145 N. River St., Hot Springs; [evansplunge.com](http://evansplunge.com) or (605) 745-5165. Open 5:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Friday; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. weekends through Labor Day. Adults \$11, children 3-12, \$9; children 2 and under free.

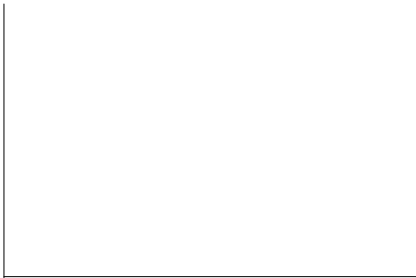
**CRAZY HORSE MEMORIAL:** Five miles north of Custer; [www.crazyhorse.org](http://www.crazyhorse.org) or (605) 673-4681. Admission: \$10 per person or \$27 per carload, with children under 6 free. Laser light show nightly until Oct. 13. A Sept. 6 "night blast" is scheduled to light up the mountain at dark with balls of fire.

**MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL:** Thirty-five miles from Rapid City; [nps.gov/moru](http://nps.gov/moru) or (605) 574-2523. Free admission; parking \$10. Open 8 a.m.-9 p.m. through Labor Day. A lighting ceremony is held each night at dusk.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS ABOVE: Mount Rushmore National Memorial is in South Dakota and near several other attractions for tourists.

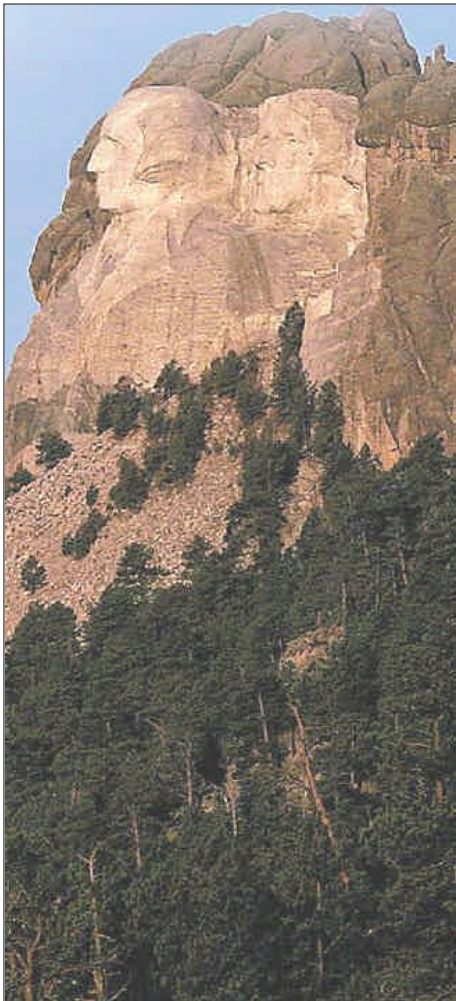




RIGHT: Badlands National Park is one of several good vacation areas in South Dakota.



BELOW: Burros are fed by tourists in Custer State Park.



BOTTOM: The freshly cleaned faces of Mount Rushmore bask in early morning sun as the moon sets in the distance.



**THE ASSOCIATED PRESS** Visitors view the fossilized remains of mammoths at the Mammoth Site of Hot Springs in South Dakota.





**THE ASSOCIATED PRESS** A hiker gazes out at Badlands National Park.

