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South Dakota's Black Hills

By Dennis Gaub for KOA Kompass

A smorgasbord of family-friendly, modestly priced attractions and activities await those who visit South Dakota's Black Hills. And that's why the picturesque area consistently ranks among the leading tourist destinations in the United States.

Finding a place to play where your dollar goes farther may be especially appealing now that pump prices are soaring.

"We tend to be a really affordable destination even when gas prices are high," said Michelle Lintz, executive director of the Rapid City, S.D., Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"People are likely to come here because they won't have to spend a ton of money" after arriving in the Black Hills, she said.

Three top attractions include:

- [Mount Rushmore National Memorial](#), where sculptor Gutzon Borglum carved the figures of four of the U.S.'s greatest presidents (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt) in the mountain.
- [Crazy Horse Memorial](#), where for more than 60 years the late sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski and his family have pursued the dream of carving an image of the legendary Lakota Indian chief into a 600-foot monolith.
- [Black Hills National Forest](#), where ponderosa pines carpet 1.2 million acres that stretch across southwestern South Dakota and northeastern Wyoming. Elevations reach more than 7,200 feet, and visitors can enjoy 11 reservoirs, 30 campgrounds, 26 picnic areas, two scenic byways, 1,300 miles of streams, 13,426 acres of wilderness and more than 450 miles of trails.

To get a full sense of the Black Hills, your itinerary might also include:

- [Custer State Park](#), 71,000 acres of scenery and wildlife viewing opportunities. Outdoor activities include hiking 7,242-foot Harney Peak, mountain biking, horseback riding, rock climbing, fishing, chuck wagon suppers and taking jeep rides to see the bison.
- [Badlands National Park](#), 244,000 acres of eroded buttes, pinnacles and spires blended with the largest, protected mixed grass prairie in the United States. It includes the Badlands Wilderness Area, site of the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret, the most endangered land mammal in North America.
- Either of the "caves," [Wind Cave National Park](#) or [Jewel Cave National Monument](#). Wind Cave, one of the world's longest and most complex caves, lies beneath mixed-grass prairie and ponderosa pine forest, home to bison, elk, pronghorn, mule deer, coyotes, and prairie dogs. Jewel Cave, the third longest cave in the world, offers cave tours and also provides habitat for several bat species.
- [Devils Tower](#), the nation's first national monument, featuring a nearly vertical monolith that rises 1,267 feet above the Belle Fourche River in northeastern Wyoming. It is considered one of the top crack climbing areas in North America.
- [Reptile Gardens](#), a display of what is billed as the world's largest reptile collection, plus raptors, parrots, orchids and 50,000 flowers.
- [Bear Country USA](#), which allows visitors to see black bear, grizzly bear, elk, reindeer, deer, cougars, bobcats and other species.
- [The Black Hills 1880 Train](#), which gives passengers a steam engine-powered,

two-hour trip from Hill City to Keystone and back.

- [Mammoth Site of Hot Springs](#), where visitors can tour an active paleontological dig and see Ice Age fossils.
- [Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary](#), home to a herd of 400 wild mustangs.
- [Spearfish](#), which lies at the mouth of scenic Spearfish Canyon, offers fishing, hunting, skiing, snowmobiling and other outdoor sports.

And, if you're trying to escape the crowds and enjoy less known but worthwhile attractions, here are a few suggested by Lintz:

- [The Journey Museum](#) in Rapid City, a "hands-on cultural center" for the region. "It's a nice place to visit before or after seeing the Black Hills," she said.
- [The Stavkirke Chapel](#), a replica of an 830-year-old church in Norway. A gift shop and interpretive center are on the site, which is one of several free attractions along the [City Star Tour](#) route. Other highlights include Memorial Park, which honors veterans and victims of Rapid City's 1972 flood, and Storybook Island, a park where children can frolic among nursery-rhyme displays and live animals.

To sample authentic Western history as well as modern entertainment, you will want to spend time in colorful [Deadwood](#). Wild Bill Hickock and Calamity Jane both lived and died here. The entire town is a National Historic Landmark and the only place in South Dakota with legal gaming.

And don't forget Sturgis, site of the famous annual [Black Hills/Sturgis Motorcycle Rally](#), which will celebrate its 64th anniversary in August 2004.

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