

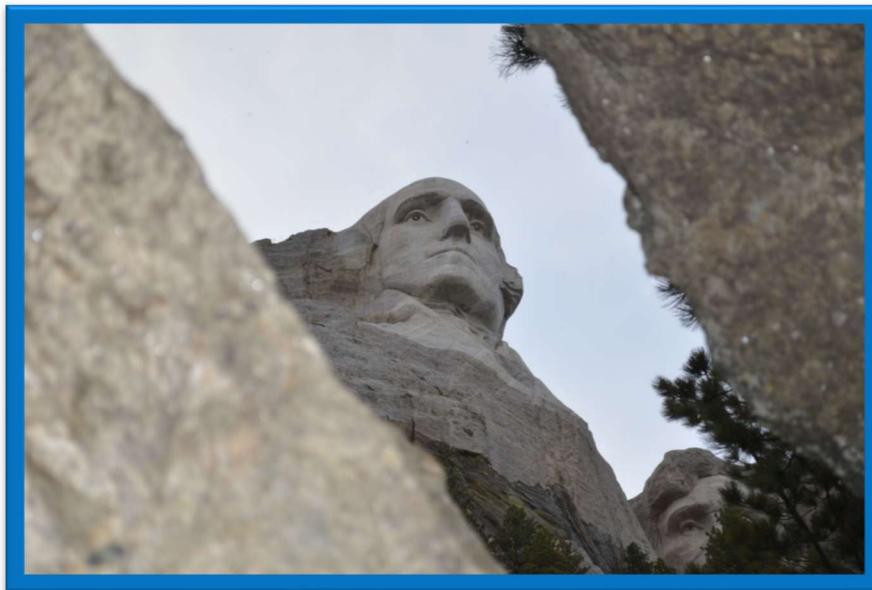


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South Dakota: Much More Than Rushmore



Heading to visit the giant heads of state? If you are under the impression that a day or so is plenty of time for this trip, you are monumentally wrong. Yes, you can take in Washington and his buddies in an afternoon, but you won't want to leave the area if that's all you've seen.

Let me be clear. If you're looking for big night life, head for the Big Apple, not the Black Hills. If you're looking for an escape from urban chaos and are hoping to take in some nature, this is the spot. Animals, hiking, caving, and even a little history too. I spent four days there, and still had to be selective in what I saw and did. It's easily a week-long adventure.

Here are my top five picks:

Jewel Cave: No worries for claustrophobics or bat-haters (I'm in the latter crowd.) Fun tidbit: bats stay near the surface, by cave entrances, for food access. This cave is so far below the surface that an elevator ride takes you down – far from bat territory. This is the second-longest cave in the world, and the caverns and walkways are so large it's like exploring a small underground city. A harder 3.5-hour tour is available, which reaches those claustrophobic spots, but I took the 80 minute scenic option. Stalactites and stalagmites abound, and intriguing rock formations include one that resembles Jabba the Hutt.

Crazy Horse Memorial: If you thought Mount Rushmore was huge, this will blow your mind. Still a work in progress, the mountain carving is about eight times the size of the four presidents. You can't get nearly as close to Crazy Horse himself as you can Mr. Washington, due to the fact that dynamite blasting is still underway to complete the sculpture. But, you can gaze from afar (really far) and take in the

Native American dancers and exhibits at the site. You can also buy a combo ticket to see the rodeo on the grounds. I did, and yes, this was my first rodeo.

Bear Country USA: Warning, this may spoil future visits to the zoo. There, the bears are usually hibernating a couple hundred feet away beyond a small ravine. At Bear Country, you are up in the bears' business. Of course, staying in the car, windows up, is a must. But, how often do you get to see a bear walk right by your window, or stop in front of your car and stare you in the eye? After driving through the preserve, which includes bears and other wildlife, you can walk through Babyland (more zoo-like) and see the bear cubs and other babies. Bring the camera!

Custer State Park: A must for animal and outdoor lovers. A scenic drive through the park brings views of bison, prairie dogs, elk, and stunning landscapes. The Harney Peak Trail offers a 7-mile hike to the highest point in the States east of the Rockies. The views at the top are worth the climb. A selfie at the peak is a must.

Reptile Gardens: Learn how to wrestle an alligator, pet giant turtles, and go underground to get eye-level with prairie dogs. (Yes, I realize prairie dogs are not reptiles, but this place has a great display of them anyway, and they are adorable.) Informative and entertaining shows include crocs and gators, birds, and snakes. Beautiful garden areas and a nature dome add ambiance for strolling and seeing the creatures. Well worth the visit. After all, how many chances do you get to pet a baby alligator?