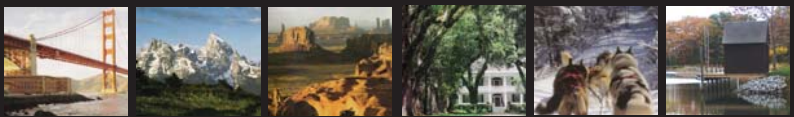


# Sea to Shining Sea



## In Search of America: Strike It Rich in Custer State Park, South Dakota



by Prudence Baird

Quick. Think of a quintessential American vacation that will put these bellicose times in perspective; a vacation that evokes the majesty of our nation's founding principles and brave pioneers while stirring your soul with breathtaking natural wonders. If you said **Custer State Park** in the Black Hills of South Dakota, you are right!

Where?! I, too, had never heard of Custer State Park until I googled a stopover between DeSmet, South Dakota and Paradise Valley, Montana. The more I researched, the more I realized that Custer State Park is not a stopover at all, but a place where my family could marinate in an abundance of historical, natural, physical and spiritual riches for two weeks or more. So plans were changed to squeeze in the absolute minimum of time—four glorious days—in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

Driving east along the low-slung I-90, the Black Hills' many

prairie in the United States. We were there but three hours and, on foot, were just yards away from Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, prong-horned antelope, mountain goats, prairie dogs and antelope.

Continue on 44 through Buffalo Gap National Grasslands towards Rapid City, then drive south on highway 79 to 36 west. This brings you into Custer State Park's eastern entrance, the one Calvin Coolidge used

Dining Room, as presidents once did!

On a map, Custer is a rectangular robot with one arm and a big foot that touches Wind Cave National Park at its southern border. The outstretched arm is home to Custer's **Sylvan Lake**, and its eponymous lodge, built in 1937 after the original burned down. The lake, filled with paddleboats and swimmers, looks and feels natural, lapping against giant granite boulders and

crisscross Custer's 71,000 acres of diverse terrain. Harney Peak Trail, a moderately difficult 7-mile round-trip, rewards hikers with views of Cathedral Spires, the equivalent of 100 Notre Dames carved of black granite. See why Custer's nickname is "Little Yellowstone" when driving five scenic highways that loop the park. Wildlife Loop Road is exactly that—you may find your car mired in a herd of buffalo that have

Memorial and is masterfully carved right into the mountain as if fashioned by the dwarves from Lord of the Rings. My kids got a kick out of seeing a Winnebago wedged in one of the narrow flying buttress tunnels.

We also stayed one night

at the 1920's log cabin-themed **Blue Bell Lodge & Resort**, located in the park's southern grassland and ponderosa pine terrain at the foot of Mt. Coolidge. Our roomy cabin was impeccable and the meals at the lodge were down-home and great. Do not miss the Western Chuckwagon Cookout, which takes you by covered wagon deep into bison country for an outstanding evening of wildlife viewing, mouthwatering barbecue, singing, dancing and fun!

Other accommodations at the park include cottages at **Legion Lake Resort**, dating from 1913.

Custer also serves as a base from which you can take in Wind Cave National Park, Jewel Cave National Monument, the private Crazy Horse Memorial, legendary



Top: Viewed from the top of Little Devil's Tower, the Cathedral Spires jut from the Black Hills National Forest. Custer State Park encompasses these spectacular rock formations, thick timber and expansive prairie landscapes.

Left: One of the nation's largest public buffalo herds roams the prairies of Custer State Park. The herd often stops traffic along the popular Wildlife Loop Road.

Top and left photos © 2001-2007 South Dakota Office of Tourism

Below: Casey Metcalfe and one of the wild donkeys of Custer State Park. Photo by Prudence Baird



offerings unfold like Beethoven's 5th Symphony, layered one on top of the next, and each one more spectacular than the last. Drop down at Highway 44 to take a leisurely drive through Badlands National Park (and thus avoid the Paris Hilton of tourist traps, Wall Drug, just ahead). Stop at Badlands Visitor Center to pick up materials on the many short hikes and plentiful drive-up lookouts—then take your time meandering through this 244,000 acre park of sharply eroded buttes, pinnacles and spires blended with the largest protected mixed grass

when visiting his "Summer White House," the stone and cedar **State Game Lodge**, built in 1920 and today one of four historic accommodations inside the park. Hang out in the rockers on the shady porch and imagine Coolidge's or Eisenhower's presidential motorcades coming up the circular drive as they once did decades ago. The lodge is surrounded by aspen, birch and oak, and offers excellent trout fishing in nearby Grace Coolidge Creek, which winds through the valley. For a taste of local game, dine in the lodge's historic Pheasant

slender beaches of fine sand and clean dirt. We stayed in one of the cozy cabins tucked into the fir forest, but the lodge has modern rooms and a rustic, soaring great room complete with bar, a piano player and fireplace. Delicious meals can be had in a beautiful dining room overlooking the lake.

While at Sylvan, we hiked two of 17 trails that



decided not to abide by the rules of the road, or surrounded by wild mules whose velvety muzzles reach through open car windows right into your picnic tote in the back seat! Iron Mountain Road, a WPA beauty built in 1933, connects the park with Mount Rushmore National

western town **Deadwood** (where you can see the graves of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane), and, of course, **Mount Rushmore**—all within 30 minutes or so of Custer.

**Mount Rushmore National Memorial** is free  
Please see CUSTER PARK, page 27

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."—Mark Twain

