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Family Travel to Black Hills, South Dakota

GG Staff | Oct 12, 2014 - 09:05

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by **Brette Sember**, GoGirlfriend contributor

Finding the WOW factor on my home turf

When my family decided to vacation in the Black Hills area of South Dakota, I was not excited. We had traveled to Paris and Ireland the year before and this trip felt a little underwhelming in comparison. Yes, I was acting like a Euro-snob. And I got it completely wrong. The Black Hills has the entire package – stunning natural beauty, historical sites, great shopping and plenty of family fun.

Monumental reasons to visit Black Hills



the famous Mount Rushmore

The Black Hills, a small, isolated mountain range that rises from the Great Plains of North America in western South Dakota, extends into Wyoming and is home to the famous Mount Rushmore.

Three million people visit the area a year

and although it was on our bucket list, I was having trouble mustering enthusiasm. Wrong again.

The entrance, a grand walkway lined with state flags, opens to the monument that rises demandingly above, overwhelming in size and detail. It's much taller than we expected and more beautiful as well. We couldn't help but be inspired by the work that was done here and the reasons behind it. Definitely take the path under the monument for a closer view. And hit up a fellow traveler to take a photo of you and your travel companions in front of the monument.

We also visited the Crazy Horse Memorial, which isn't yet completed but the face and outline of the famous chief's arm are clearly visible. The visitors center is open to help understand what the finished product will look like and why we should



the Black Hills Mountain Range

care about this Native American who famously said, "My lands are where my dead lie buried," and refused to sign any treaties with the American government. The site houses an impressive museum of Native American arts as well as an extensive gift shop. Stay for the laser show but be prepared to be a little bewildered at the odd veer into patriotism while honoring a man

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Most Recent Comments

On **Oxnard California Girlfriend Getaway**, Julia Rosien said "We really did have a fabulous time, Rebekah. Thanks for all the sightseeing tips and the California hospitality. Can't wait to return to do it all again! Julia"

On **Oxnard California Girlfriend Getaway**, Rebekah Evans said "Go Oxnard CVB! Thank you for coming to see our 'hidden gems!' So much to do and see.... Rebekah Evans, Executive Director Ventura County West "

On **5 Must Have Carry Ons**, Darleen said "Good list I use a wrap shawl for blanket that folds up or ties to luggage. Also a must for me is chewing gum, Sinutab, nose spray and lipgloss - nivea. I get ear pain otherwise. Pillow I use is a neck roll, but a custom one not the usual horseshoe shape :) water bottle us a Brita one and can fill up with water anywhere in security or on plane. I also take nuts. And just in case of flight issues or luggage doesn't make it - emergency kit of clean undies, easy to fold shirt that can double as night attire, socks and basic



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who refused to cooperate with the government.

Awed by the natural beauty of Black Hills



State Game Lodge in Custer State Park

The Hills truly do appear black, dense with pine trees, and they rise suddenly out of the prairie with great majesty and grace as you approach them.

The roads in the area wind through the Hills with all their crevices and hidden beauty – take time to hike and see the interior of this

protected forest. It's a place of deep peace that seeped into my bones as I listened to the stillness.

The area is home to **Custer State Park**, which offers a glimpse into the past with bison, wild burros and prairie dogs. Plenty of fishing and boating opportunities abound here as well. Travel the Needles Highway and enjoy the raw geologic formations of the region. Don't miss dining at the **State Game Lodge** inside the park – President Coolidge summered here and the food is fantastic, with lots of local game options.

As if all that beauty isn't enough, drive an hour east to **Badlands National Park**. Take the Badlands Loop Road to truly enjoy the colors and shapes of the eroded rock formations that fill this park. We kept pulling over to take photos and every spot provided a better and better shot – the colors change with each angle of the sun. There's lots of hiking here as well so bring water and snacks. Although restrooms are scattered through the park, there are no refreshments for sale.



Badlands National Park

Exploring Rapid City

Rapid City lies to the north of the Black Hills area. While the Hills have lodges, motels and campgrounds, in Rapid City there are plenty of mid-level modern, newer chain hotels. There's a hip downtown area with lots of restaurants, outdoor activities and shops.



visit the presidents in Rapid City

The downtown area has life-size statues of **presidents on the corners**, and it's definitely fun to walk up to Ronald Reagan or Harry Truman and look them in the eye. There are plenty of galleries in town and the one not to miss is the **Prairie Edge Trading Company**, filled with native crafts, from museum quality to souvenirs.

As you head back down to the Black Hills area, be sure to stop at **Reptile Gardens**, which sounds like the worst type of

tourist attraction, but is in fact a world-class reptile zoo. It's worth a stop to see the silent giant hundred-year-old tortoises alone, who roam freely in their garden and can be touched and photographed. There are also shows where snakes, birds, or alligators are handled but don't miss the rain forest

makeup as well as small suez perfume and deodorant. "

On **Caribbean Beaches Guide – Lighthouse Beach, Bahamas**, Carol Breau said "Very informative. Makes one want to go right now! Thanks for all the detailed info!"

On **Whine-Free Road-Tripping with Kids**, Anonymous said "Love this! I grew up in a family that traveled together. My parents took my twin and me on so many road trips to fantastic places, and I'm forever grateful—and we did all of this (the camping gene is good when instilled early)!"



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dome, which is a thing of beauty with flowers and greens in addition to small free-roaming creatures.

I must confess we also visited [Old MacDonald's Farm](#) and were proudly the oldest family there with our twenty-something daughter and teenage son, all of us squealing in delight as we got to pet and feed goats, donkeys, sheep, cows, chickens and pigs.



Rapid City's Reptile Gardens



Vancouver, British

Discover the Mammoths



visit the Mammoth Site of Hot Springs

Haven't had enough brushes with the natural world yet? Block out a few hours to visit the [Mammoth Site of Hot Springs](#) in the southern part of the Black Hills area. At the beginning of the 20th century, the town of Hot Springs was a tourism magnet because of the healing waters of the springs and the now mostly rundown town is truly beautiful with its buildings of quarried red rock.

The Mammoth Site is the world's largest Columbian mammoth site with an ancient sinkhole filled with preserved mammoth bones. Walkways through the dig site allow visitors to stand closely by as paleontologists painstakingly uncover skeletons – 61 have been found to date – and all have been left intact in the ground to be seen.

Small town shopping

When I travel, there's nothing I love more than [shopping for treasures](#). A walk on the boardwalk in Keystone will deliver the typical t-shirts and cheap souvenirs – in an authentic feeling Western town. If you're lucky you'll catch a



Keystone's cowboys

glimpse of the seven-foot cowboy with guns and lassos who seeks to bring guests into a show. But the best shopping in the entire area is on Hill City's main street filled with eclectic galleries and artisan shops. Don't go home without buying a piece of Black Hills gold jewelry (distinctive pieces featuring green, rose, and yellow gold usually crafted in grapevine designs). The Mount Rushmore gift shop has the best selection of this unique gold. In nearby Custer make sure to stop at the [Purple Pie Place](#), for some homemade pie.

If you venture out to the Badlands, it's a crime to visit without stopping in the town of Wall (situated at the edge of the park), where you'll find the famous [Wall Drug](#) – truly the kitschiest place you'll ever visit. What started as a drug store became a crazy empire after campy signs along the highway drew customers. Today it's roadside heaven, complete with a restaurant, outdoor play area, room after room of souvenirs and numerous boutiques. You'll find your t-shirt and shot glass, but you also might find some native art or artisan-made treasure.

The Black Hills had more to offer than I imagined. It's far more than just another jaded tourist destination. The stunning beauty

of the area paired with so much to do makes it a great place to visit.

Have you had the pleasure to visit Black Hills, South Dakota? We'd love to hear what you enjoyed most about your visit. Drop a comment below or connect with us on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

About Brette Sember

Brette grew up fascinated with the treasures her grandparents brought back from their travels as they visited every continent but Antarctica. Her passion for travel includes unique shopping finds, local foods, and breathing in the air of



Brette Sember ~ @brettesember

new places. Sember is the author of more than 50 books about food, divorce, organizing, credit, business, pregnancy, parenting, as well as college textbooks. She is also a professional indexer, ghostwriter, and freelancer. She blogs about food, travel, organizing, decorating, and gardens at [PuttingItAllontheTable.com](#) and is the author of [The Gluten-Free Guide to Travel](#). She lives in Clarence, NY with her husband, two children, two golden retrievers and tortoise. Catch up with Brette on [Pinterest](#), [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#).

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