

THE BLACK HILLS

But they're really mountains and they're green!

Rising out of the undulating prairie above all elevations in America east of the Rocky Mountain, the Black Hills (the Indian name is "Paha Sapa" – the mountains that are black) present to the visitor a varied and harmonious arrangements in streams, mountains, and picturesque gorges.

Canyon walls, painted by nature in an infinite variety of colors, guard the courses of rippling streams that dance from sunlight to shadow down the mountainsides. Blue spruce and Norway pine, in an eternal struggle to conquer the massive rock-ribbed mountains, have given them the color of dark green, which viewed from a distance, shades into blue/black from which the Black Hills derive their name.

Long before the Black Hills National Forest was occupied by white men, the Indians held them sacred, coming at that time only to fish, hunt, or to get tepee poles and arrowheads. The Indians believed that back in the dim past, when the Great Spirit of the Universe desired to create for man a dwelling place of beauty, rest and peace, he called into being Paha Sapa.

An expedition, under the command of Lt. Colonel George Custer, was sent to explore the Black Hills. Gold was discovered by H. N. Ross on July 27, 1874, at the present site of Custer, South Dakota. The news traveled fast. The lure of gold, that strongest of human desires, fired men's hearts, and in spite of government orders and fear of hostile Indians, bands of goldseekers came. From the east, the north, the south, and the west came the fearless prospectors on horseback or on foot with pack mules, blazing a trail across the plains and through the forest.

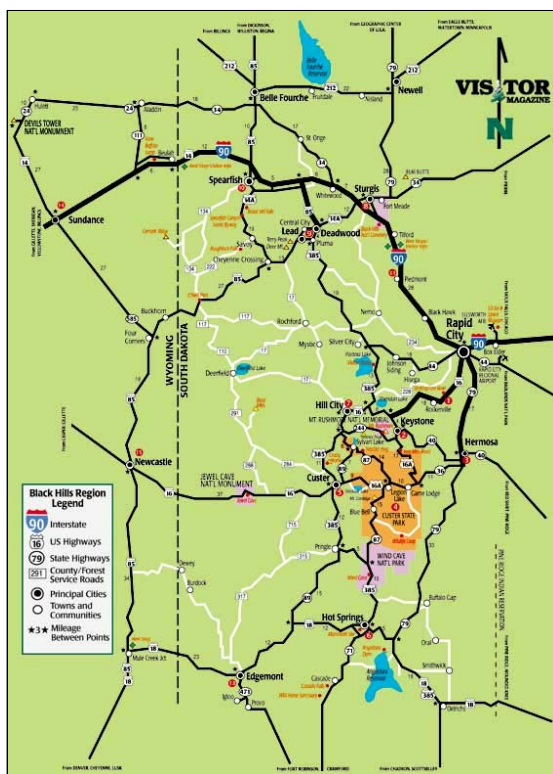
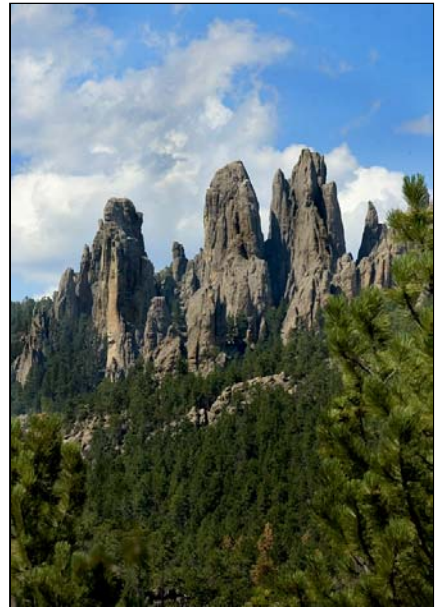
Covering an area on the western border of South Dakota of about 100 miles north and south and 50 miles to the east and west with elevations from 3,250 to 7,242 feet above sea level, the Black Hills area is the home of many other scenic wonders of the world.

The Needles of the Black Hills, standing a mile above sea level, are glorious granite spires, the result of millions of years of erosive effect of frost and wind.

Here also is to be found the largest gold mine in North America – the Homestake Gold Mine in Lead.

In the Heart of the Black Hills lies Custer State Park, the second largest state park in the United States. Here are large herds of elk, deer, buffalo, and Rocky Mountain sheep and goats.

The total effect of the Black Hills, in terms resorted to by poets, geographers, scientists, and philosophers, is "indefinably beautiful".



To really know the Black Hills is a lifelong adventure. To view even the highlights could take weeks. To try to "do it all" in a day or two is simply impossible – even with good organization.

Keep in mind that the Black Hills covers a magnificent area 100 miles north and south by 50 miles east and west, and while roads are good, they are not fast speedways and limited passing areas tend to slow up traffic from time to time. It might be helpful to plan your tour in four segments:

- A trip to the Northern Hills
- A visit to Central Hills
- A tour of the Southern Hills
- And a trip to the Badlands

You might consider doing what experienced travelers do – allow yourself more time for the Black Hills in your schedule – there's more to do and see in the Black Hills than almost anywhere else you may go!

The Black Hills Underground

How about a walk in the “underground” side? The caves of the Black Hills are an exciting trip inside the geology of the region.

Located in a band of limestone rock called the “Paha Sapa Limestone,” the caves encircle the central granite of the Black Hills and comprise the second-longest cave system in the world. This limestone was created during the Mississippian period, approximately 320 to 360 million years ago on the bottom of an ancient sea.



Of 72 known crystal caves in the world, 68 are located in the Black Hills. Eight of these caves have been carefully developed to accommodate public tours. They offer a variety of experiences and each is unique. The facilities provide electric lighting, steps, handrails, and safe, informative guided tours for the entire family.

Black Hills caves are renowned for their abundance of rare formations and maze-like interconnections. Formations range from the massive to the delicate. Some of the common formations are stalactites, stalagmites, columns, spiraling helictites, flowstone, ribbon-like draperies, frostwork, boxwork, and cave popcorn. Translucent calcite crystals that line the glittering walls, floors, and ceilings are prevalent. Each Black Hills cave has its own special features and distinctive examples of the various formations.

Most cave temperatures average 50 degrees Fahrenheit, so a light jacket or sweater, as well as comfortable walking shoes are recommended and, of course, bring your camera. Cave tours offer an experience unlike anything else in nature. Within the short span of an hour, you are taken into a different world where dripping water, sparkling crystals, and illuminated passages reveal the wonders of Black Hills underground. For the intrepid few who wish to leave the beaten path, the various caves have a variety of opportunities for you. Several Black Hills caves offer spelunking tours designed for beginners as well as seasoned cavers.

Nature began her handiwork in the Black Hills caves 60 million years ago. Today this underground wilderness is still being actively explored and is yours to see and enjoy.

