

# The Black Hills

By Denise Seith

# Rush

Nearly all of South Dakota's gold-bearing deposits are concentrated in one area — the 65-mile wide by 125-mile long Black Hills National Forest. In addition to gold, this scenic recreation area is filled with forests so thick they look black from a distance (hence the name), rugged rock formations, cool caves, rushing rivers and an abundance of national memorials and parks.

The wildlife is plentiful, too. There are thousands of free-roaming buffalo, spry pronghorns, shaggy bighorn sheep, and even shy prairie dogs. Besides the outdoor beauty, this region is best known for the Black Hills Gold Rush of 1876, which began in July 1874.

Sent by the federal government to scout locations for military forts and to investigate rumors of gold ore, General George Armstrong Custer led his famous expedition into the Black Hills in July 1874. The party consisted of 1,000 men, including a military band, 2,000 animals and 110 wagons.

While camping on French Creek near present-day Custer City, Horatio Ross, a prospector along on the expedition, discovered gold. General Custer reported the find and almost immediately the Black Hills Gold Rush began. General Custer and many of his men, though, never saw the full impact of

Black Hills granite peaks

their find. They died at the Battle of the Little Bighorn two years later.

The Black Hills Gold Rush should never have happened. In 1868, a treaty between the U.S. and the Sioux Nation called for the abandonment of military posts in Indian territory and set aside the region for Native Americans only. The Black Hills, then and now, are considered sacred to the Lakota Sioux. But it took just one powerful word, *gold*, to change history forever. By the end of 1875, thousands of miners, cattle ranchers, railroaders and businessmen had violated the treaty and settled.

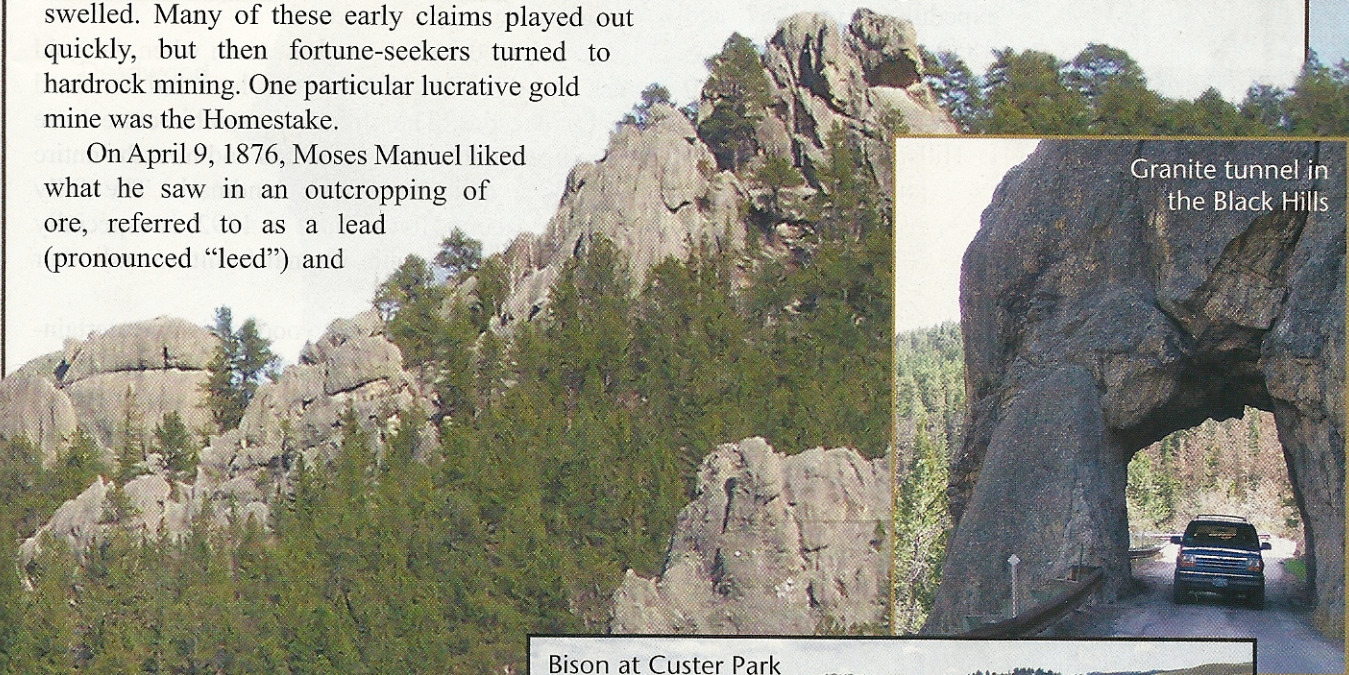
Custer City was one of the first mining camps in South Dakota to spring up in 1875. The town enjoyed a short boom until the following spring when a rich strike was made near Deadwood Gulch. Within a short time, Custer City was almost abandoned. Soon, placer claims were staked throughout the entire area and the prospecting population swelled. Many of these early claims played out quickly, but then fortune-seekers turned to hardrock mining. One particular lucrative gold mine was the Homestake.

On April 9, 1876, Moses Manuel liked what he saw in an outcropping of ore, referred to as a lead (pronounced "leed") and

so he and his brother, Fred, established the Homestake Gold Mine near the present-day town of Lead. Little did these brothers know, they had found the richest source of gold in the area and that the mine would go on to produce more than 40 million ounces of gold in its 126 years of operation.

In June 1877, a consortium of San Francisco investors led by George Hearst (father of newspaperman William Randolph Hearst) purchased the 4.5-acre claim from the Manuel brothers for \$70,000. Talk about a great investment! No stranger to mining, Hearst had interests in California's 1849 gold rush, the Comstock Lode in Nevada, the Anaconda Copper Mine in Montana and many others.

Although General Custer's 1874 expedition was the most well known, it was not the first to search for gold in the Black Hills. Two brothers, Louis and Ivan Thoen, reportedly discovered a sandstone



Granite tunnel in the Black Hills

Larry Seith and burros at Custer Park



Bison at Custer Park

artifact in 1887 while hauling building stone from the base of Lookout Mountain near the town of Spearfish. The stone appears to have been inscribed more than 50 years earlier by a prospector who probably didn't live long after he etched it. His crude inscription reads: *"Came to these hills in 1833. Seven of us all died but me Ezra Kind. Killed by Indians beyond the high hill. Got our gold June 1834. Got all of the gold we could carry. Our ponys all got by Indians. I have lost my gun and nothing to eat and Indians hunting me."*

The "Thoen Stone" is now on display in the Adams Museum in Deadwood.

In 1855, Dr. Ferdinand Hayden also explored the Black Hills as a member of General Harney's reconnaissance. The geologist reported then that, "... the gold-bearing strata, are well developed in these hills." Two additional military expeditions in 1857 and 1859 took place and a few individuals claimed to have found gold in the Hills on their individual journeys through the region during the Civil War.

While mining has ceased to be the primary support

of the local economy today, it still continues on a much smaller scale. One or two mining companies still operate and in the spring and summer it is not unusual to see prospectors working the rivers and creeks with pans and sluices. Highbanking requires a water rights permit.

Perhaps those capitalizing most on the Black Hills Gold Rush are the ghost towns. Many of the earliest mining camps have completely disappeared, but others such as Lead, Deadwood, Custer and Keystone continue to thrive by promoting their rich mining heritage.

### LIVELY DEADWOOD

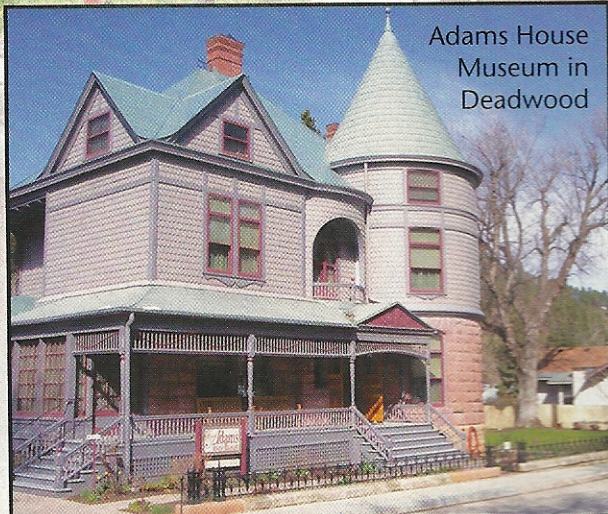
Originally named for the dead trees found in narrow Deadwood Gulch, lumbering helped legendary Deadwood get its economic start. Deadwood's true roots, though, took hold during the Black Hills Gold Rush. Seemingly overnight, the city was ablaze with gold fever. Tents and saloons sprung up fast and furiously.

Deadwood became a ghost town when the gold rush ended just a couple of years later and remained so for decades. The streets and architecture have since been authentically restored and now the entire town is a national historic landmark. The fully restored Adams House, built in 1892, is especially elegant and filled with original furniture and other household items.

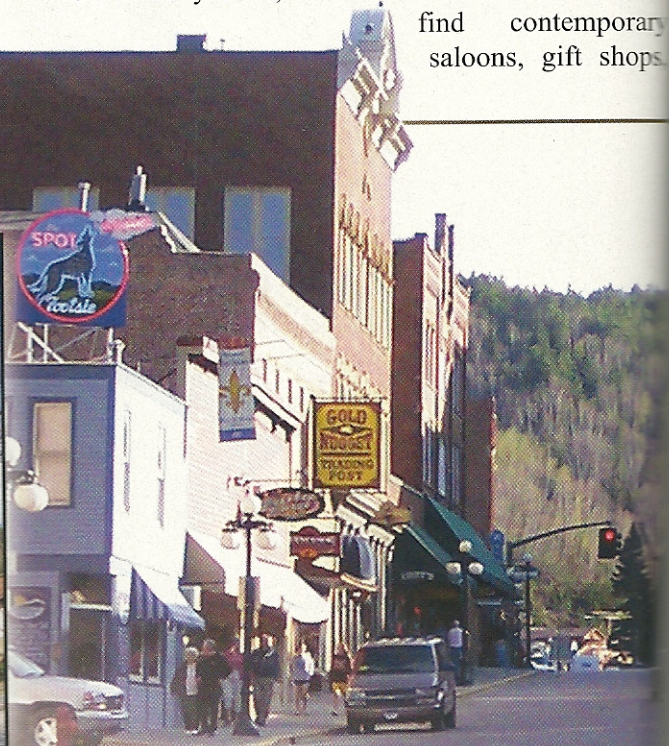
For a small town, Deadwood is big on entertainment. Gambling was legalized in 1989, and since then more than 80 historic gaming halls offer everything from nickel slots to \$100 poker bets. If you run out of Lady Luck, take a walk down Main Street to find contemporary saloons, gift shops



Wild Bill's grave



Adams House Museum in Deadwood



restaurants and museums.

Thanks to the successful HBO series a few years back, you might already be familiar with some of the many legends of yesteryear who lived and died in Deadwood — especially Wild Bill Hickok. Pay your respects to Wild Bill and many other colorful Wild West characters at the Mount Moriah cemetery. Mount Moriah also provides a panoramic view of Deadwood and sweeping vistas of the Black Hills. Although walking tour maps don't quite seem appropriate for a cemetery, grab a guide at the information center. The hillside graveyard actually feels more like a peaceful park. It is the final resting place of Calamity Jane, Preacher Henry Weston Smith (credited with first bringing Christianity to the Black Hills) and Blanche Colman (the first woman admitted to the South Dakota bar.)

John Perret,

known as Potato Creek Johnny, was also buried here in 1943. Johnny made history in 1929 by finding one of the largest gold nuggets (7.75 troy ounces) ever to come out of the Black Hills. Believe it or not, W.E. Adams bought the nugget for only \$250.

A replica is on display at the Adams Museum and the original is stored in the museum's safe deposit box. To make the story even more interesting, an unsubstantiated rumor claims that Perrett's nugget did not come out of Potato Creek at all, but is actually a melted mass of gold ore stolen from a neighboring miner!

#### LEAD

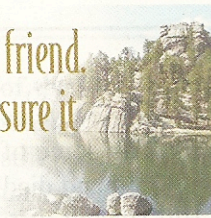
Perched on a precariously steep incline a mile above sea

Deadwood



**F**arewell to all! Thanks 4 being my friend.  
We will all stand tall, and I'll treasure it  
'till the end!"

**Rush**



level, the town of Lead is just three miles from its more notorious neighbor, Deadwood. Like Deadwood, Lead was also founded during the famous Black Hills Gold Rush of 1876, but Lead's longevity fared better than Deadwood's. By the time South Dakota was granted statehood in 1889, Lead was the state's largest city, mostly due to the Homestake Gold Mine. Lead was basically a "company town" for the mine employees. Before its closure in 2002, the Homestake was the oldest, largest and deepest mine in the Western Hemisphere, reaching more than 8,000 feet below ground. When the mine closed, a hoist operator inscribed a message on an exhaust fan 4,550 feet underground: "Farewell to all! Thanks 4 being my friend. We will all stand tall, and I'll treasure it 'till the end!" Guided surface tours of the mine are conducted seasonally or peer over the edge of the open-cut mining area behind the Homestake Visitor Center. Amazing!

It's easy to step back in time at the  
Black Hills Mining  
Museum. Machinery

used to mine gold at the Homestake is on display and the simulated underground mine is one of a kind. To stretch your legs, take the town's self-guided walking tour (maps available at the Chamber of Commerce) and stroll past many of Lead's historical buildings, including the Lead Opera House, which has been a real gem in the Black Hills for over a century. You'll also find unique shops in Lead. If jewelry tops your list of must-have souvenirs, there is no shortage of famous Black Hills gold jewelry stores. By law, all Black Hills jewelry — the traditional combination of yellow, pink, and green gold — must be made in the Black Hills. In addition to watching artisans create necklaces, bracelets, and more, you'll learn that the distinctive colors occur during the alloying process. Pink is created from a combination of gold and copper, while green is a mixture of gold and nickel.

#### **MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL**

While in the Black Hills, don't miss its monumental memorials.

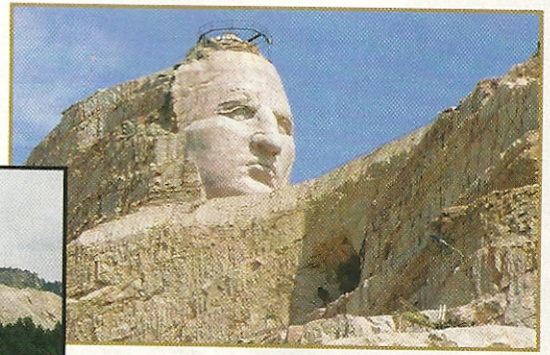
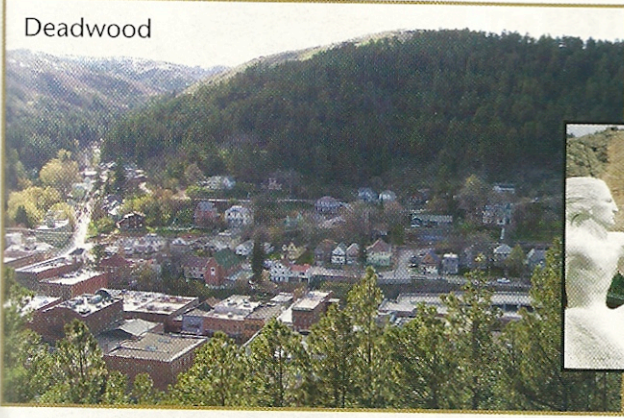
A literal highlight are the 60-foot likenesses of our country's forefathers —

Mount Rushmore

Homestake open cut  
gold mine



Deadwood



Unfinished Crazy Horse monument

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln — immortalized in stone on 5,725-foot Mount Rushmore. The colossal carving was completed in 1941 by master sculptor Gutzon Borglum.

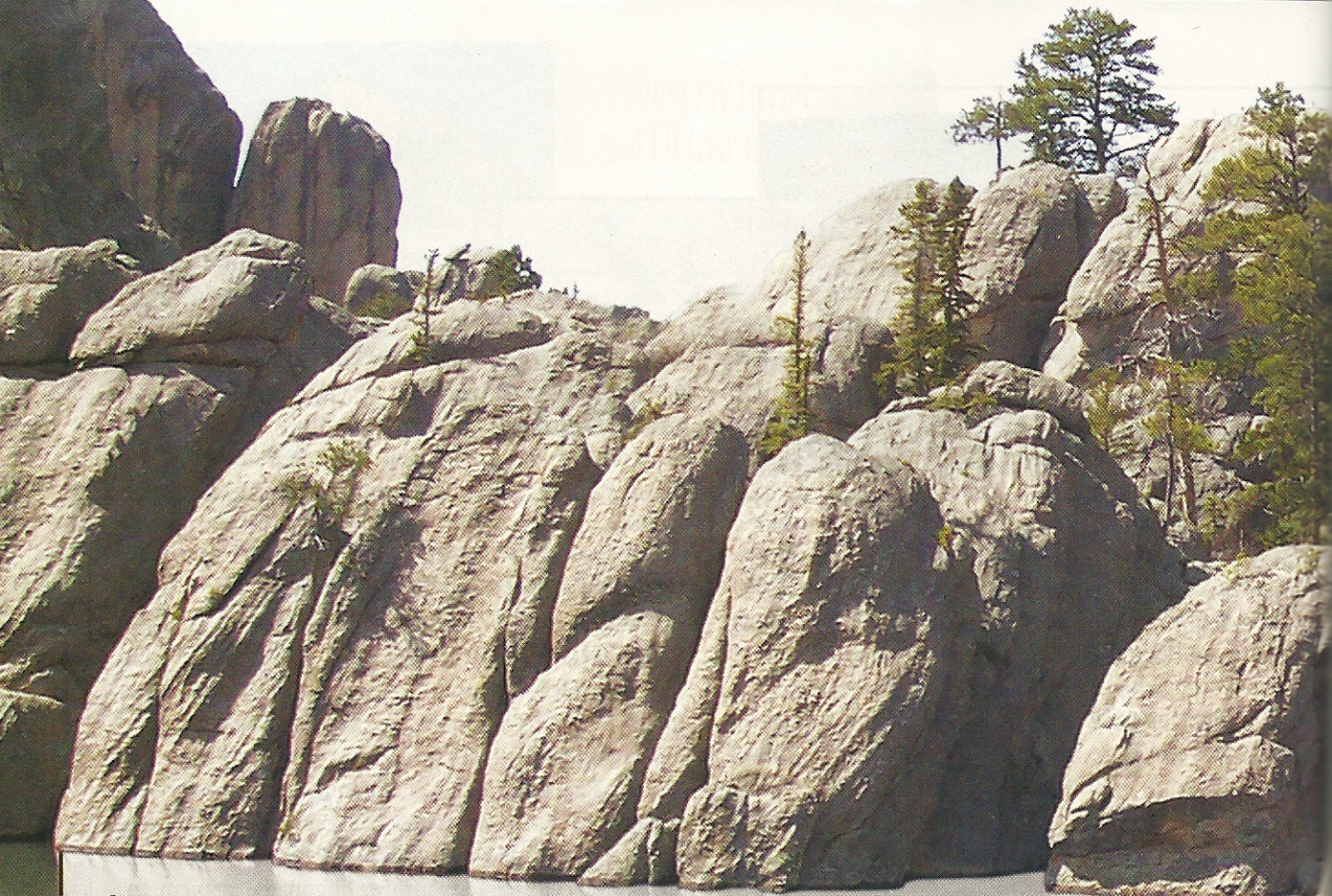
Mount Rushmore was initially envisioned as a tourist destination— a simple way to bring more sightseers into South Dakota. The memorial definitely does that, but also serves a greater purpose. America's "shrine of democracy" is a true testament to the 14 years of skill and dedication shown by Borglum and 400 workers. As you can imagine, the making of the masterpiece was a monumental task, too — and dangerous. Ninety percent of the rock that had to be removed to create the stone portraits was blasted away with dynamite before the intricate facial features could be chiseled into the granite. Borglum sketched the faces first, then cast them in plaster. Next, the 1:12 scale models were transferred to the mountain (one inch on the model equaled one foot of rock). Mount Rushmore National Memorial epitomizes the state's slogan, "Great Faces and Great Places".

Maybe even more amazing is the project's modest price tag. It was completed for less than \$1 million, a bargain for a priceless national treasure.

### **CRAZY HORSE MEMORIAL**

Crazy Horse Memorial is another place to see "Great Faces." This memorial is a work in progress, so bring a little imagination and a zoom lens for your camera. The viewing area is about three-quarters of a mile from the monolith itself. Korczak Ziolkowski, a self-taught sculptor who assisted Gutzon Borglum in creating Mount Rushmore, began the project in 1948 and worked on it exclusively until his death in 1982. When the memorial is finished, it is expected to be the largest carving in the world, featuring a 641-foot long and 563-foot high Crazy Horse (Tasunke Witko) sitting astride his horse. The face was finished in 1998, and although blasting continues on the body, it is at a very slow pace, so completion is likely to take decades.





## CUSTER STATE PARK

Wildlife-watchers will love Custer State Park's 18-mile Wildlife Loop Road. The two-lane paved road traverses through and around open grasslands and scenic rolling hills where buffalo, deer, elk, antelope, and prairie dogs roam. You may also encounter the park's infamous "begging burros" holding up traffic in hopes of getting a handout. These unofficial long-eared park ambassadors are actually feral descendants of a herd of burros that were used by the park in the 1920s to give trail rides up to 7,242-foot Harney Peak, the highest point in the Black Hills. This 71,000-acre park is also filled with first-rate campgrounds, resort style lodges and beautiful Sylvan Lake.

### CAVES

Two gold prospectors, Frank and Albert Michaud, are credited for literally bringing Jewel Cave to light. In 1900, the brothers discovered a cavern lined with dazzling calcite crystals and tried turning it into a tourist attraction. Although their venture wasn't successful at the time, it eventually led to the creation of Jewel Cave National Monument — the world's second longest cave (Mammoth Cave in Kentucky is the first) — with 155 mapped miles of crystal-lined passages. The National Park Service began conducting underground tours here in 1939, which are still offered today.

The quest for gold also helped to establish Wind Cave, the world's fourth longest cavern with 135

mapped miles. In the 1890s, the South Dakota Mining Company sent J.D. McDonald into the cave seeking gold. He didn't find any metal, but for at least a decade Mr. McDonald and his sons managed the property for the mining company, capitalizing instead on guided underground tours.

In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt selected Wind Cave as the first cave to be designated as a national park. Ranger-led tours are the only way to see the cavern's unique "boxwork" formations. Boxwork is honeycomb patterns of thin blades of calcite that form on cave walls and ceiling. You can see many examples of boxwork, "frostwork," and other exceptional compositions on the popular tours.

With towering granite formations, thick pine forests and rivers so rich they once started a gold rush, you won't want to be without a camera in South Dakota's Black Hills National Forest — or your prospecting equipment. GPAA claims in Custer, Lawrence, and Pennington counties still provide gold prospectors with excellent opportunities to take home fine gold, flake, and even a few small nuggets. Refer to your *Miner's Guide* for details, directions and regulations.

*Denise Seith is a freelance travel writer and treasure hunter based in Salem, Oregon. She and her husband Larry are at [www.GoldRushTradingPost.com](http://www.GoldRushTradingPost.com), an online prospecting equipment and supply store.*

## If you go:

LEAD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
160 W. Main Street  
Lead, S.D. 57754  
605-584-1100  
[www.leadmethere.org/](http://www.leadmethere.org/)

DEADWOOD CHAMBER  
OF COMMERCE  
767 Main Street  
Deadwood, S.D. 57732  
605-578-1876  
[www.deadwood.com](http://www.deadwood.com)

BLACK HILLS VISITOR WEBSITE  
[www.blackhillsvisitor.com](http://www.blackhillsvisitor.com)

MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL PARK  
Park Headquarters 605-574-2523  
[www.nps.gov/moru/](http://www.nps.gov/moru/)

CRAZY HORSE MEMORIAL  
Located on Crazy Horse Memorial  
US Hwy. 16 / 385 between Hill City  
and Custer.  
Phone: 605-673-4681  
[www.crazyhorsememorial.org](http://www.crazyhorsememorial.org)

CUSTER STATE PARK  
13329 US Hwy. 16A  
Custer, SD 57730  
(605) 255-4515  
<http://gfp.sd.gov/state-parks/director/y/custer/>

JEWEL CAVE NATIONAL MONUMENT  
Phone: 605-673-8300  
[www.nps.gov/jeca/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/jeca/index.htm)

WIND CAVE NATIONAL PARK  
Phone: 605-745-4600  
[www.nps.gov/wica/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/wica/index.htm)

**Editor's Note:** *If you are not sure about where you can and cannot prospect, be sure to contact the GPAA or Public Lands for The People.*

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