

South Dakota

By Tom Kirvan

A LAND OF MONUMENTS, MAJESTY, AND MYSTIQUE

South Dakota, a state of rugged beauty and timeless allure, is located in the heart of the American Midwest. Known for its sweeping prairies, dramatic badlands, and iconic monuments, it offers visitors a glimpse into the natural and historical riches of the United States. With a population of just under 900,000, South Dakota is a haven for those seeking open spaces and a connection to history.

South Dakota's geography is as diverse as its culture. The state is divided into two regions by the Missouri River. The East River region of the state is characterized by rolling plains and fertile farmland, while the West River section is known for its rugged landscapes, including Badlands National Park and Black Hills. The state's central location provides a mix of environments, making it a fascinating destination for adventurers and nature enthusiasts.

The capital city, Pierre, is one of the smallest state capitals in the country, yet it serves as a serene and picturesque hub. Situated along the Missouri River, Pierre is a tranquil setting and offering itself as a gateway to the state's outdoor activities and historical sites.

South Dakota is home to Black Elk Peak, the highest natural point in the state as well as east of the Rocky Mountains, standing at 7,244 feet. Located in Black Hills National Forest, the peak offers sweeping views of the surrounding forests and rock formations. Named after a revered Oglala Lakota holy man, Black Elk Peak is a sacred site and a popular hiking destination for visitors.

The state's history is deeply intertwined with its landscapes and indigenous cultures. The Black Hills, sacred to the Lakota Sioux, have been a center of cultural and spiritual significance for centuries. The Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) initially recognized the Black Hills as part of the Great Sioux Reservation, but the discovery of gold led to conflict and the eventual seizure of the land by the U.S. government.

The state also played a pivotal role in the story of westward expansion, particularly during the Gold Rush of the late 19th century. Towns like Deadwood sprung up during this era, creating a colorful history of prospectors, outlaws, and pioneers.

South Dakota was also the site of the tragic Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, where U.S. troops killed hundreds of Lakota men, women, and children. The site remains a powerful symbol of Native American resilience and a somber reminder of the nation's complex history.



Fast Facts

Capital: Pierre

Population: 900,000

Highest Point: Black Elk Peak (7,244 feet)

Must-see Attraction: Mount Rushmore

South Dakota

Top 5 Must-See Tourist Destinations

- **Mount Rushmore National Memorial:** Perhaps South Dakota's most famous landmark, Mount Rushmore features the colossal faces of four U.S. presidents – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln – carved into the granite of the Black Hills. The construction, which took 14 years to complete, was the work of sculptor Gutzon Borglum, the son of Danish immigrants. This awe-inspiring monument is a tribute to the nation's history and draws millions of visitors annually.
- **Badlands National Park:** A striking contrast to the lush Black Hills, the Badlands are a landscape of rugged beauty. Known for its eroded buttes, pinnacles, and spires, the park offers stunning vistas, hiking trails, and a glimpse into the region's ancient past through its rich fossil beds.
- **Custer State Park:** One of the crown jewels of South Dakota, Custer State Park, is a wildlife haven and outdoor paradise. Home to a thriving herd of American bison, the park also offers scenic drives, hiking trails, and tranquil lakes, making it a must-visit for nature enthusiasts.
- **Crazy Horse Memorial:** Located just west of Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse Memorial is a monumental sculpture in progress, honoring the great Lakota leader. Once completed, it will be the largest mountain carving in the world. The site also houses a museum dedicated to Native American heritage and culture.
- **Deadwood:** This historic Old West town is steeped in legend and lore. Once a lawless gold rush town, Deadwood is now a vibrant tourist destination with preserved 19th-century architecture, casinos, and attractions like the graves of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane.