

# Historic Western North Dakota & South Dakota – TR to the Faces!

The North Dakota Badlands provide the scenic backdrop and a chance for you to visit the prairie dog town, view the buffalo, wild horses, deer and elk. This National Park was named for the 26<sup>th</sup> President and his contributions to conservation.

**HISTORIC MEDORA:** The town of Medora was founded in April 1883 by a 24-year-old French nobleman, the Marquis de Mores. He named the town for his bride, the former Medora von Hoffman, daughter of a wealthy New York City banker.

The valley of the Little Missouri had been the scene of varied activity long before the arrival of the Marquis. Native Americans had hunted the area for many generations, an example later followed by early white explorers and frontiersmen. General Alfred Sully fought the Sioux in 1864 a few miles south of the present site of Medora, in what became known as "The Battle of the Badlands." Lieutenant-Colonel George Custer passed through in 1876 on his fatal march west to the Little Bighorn.

Another colorful individual drawn to this area was a young New York politician named Theodore Roosevelt. He first arrived to hunt buffalo in September 1883, immediately fell in love with the land, and invested in cattle raising. He would eventually own two large ranches - the Maltese Cross, about seven miles south of Medora, and the Elkhorn, about 35 miles north of town. In 1901 Roosevelt, at age 42, became the youngest president in U.S. history, serving until 1909. He called his years in the badlands "the romance of my life," and often credited his Dakota experiences with enabling him to become president.

Other notable individuals have also called Medora their home. The three Eaton brothers began entertaining eastern visitors at their Custer Trail Ranch about five miles south of Medora in 1883, and the first "dude ranch" in the United States was soon in full operation. Tom Mix, who became a great western movie star, married Miss Olive Stokes in Medora on January 10, 1909.

In 1962, entrepreneur Harold Schafer and his Gold Seal Company began a restoration and modernization of the old western town, developing many additional attractions. Their efforts, now managed by the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, and the efforts of many independent business people, have helped make Medora one of the premier family entertainment destinations in the country.

**PRESENT DAY** - Medora is the gateway to the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. This authentic Old West cow-town was founded in 1883 by the Marquis de Mores and named for his wife. Medora offers a musical extravaganza, trail rides, mountain biking, hiking, museums, many gift shops and restaurants are bustling during the summer season.

When Theodore Roosevelt came to Dakota Territory to hunt bison in 1883, he was a skinny, young, spectacled dude from New York. He could not have imagined how his adventure in this remote and unfamiliar place would forever alter the course of the nation. The rugged landscape and strenuous life that TR experienced here would help shape a conservation policy that we still benefit from today.

**THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK NORTH UNIT:** 52 miles north on Highway 85. During his administration, President Theodore Roosevelt founded the United States Forest Service, signed the National Monuments Act and established the first federal game preserve. His conservation efforts led to the founding of the National Park Service, established to preserve and protect unspoiled places like his beloved North Dakota Badlands, now known as Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

The two units of Theodore Roosevelt National Park offer majestic Badlands scenery, abundant wildlife and all kinds of adventures of your making. The North Unit, accessible from U.S. Highway 85 south of Watford City, has taller buttes and is heavily forested in places. The beauty and allure of the North Unit draws visitors year-round for sweeping vistas of this designated wilderness.

The scenic drive is 14 miles has turnouts with spectacular views and interpretive signs. The nature trails are self-guided and take you through coulees and breaks. Visit the prairie dog town, Oxbow Overlook and the Edge of Glacier Pullout.

### *Little Missouri National Grasslands*

**LARGEST AND MOST DIVERSE OF THE 19 GRASSLANDS FOUND IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES:** 140 mile stretch of grasslands cover more than 1 million acres. Both Theodore Roosevelt National Park units are part of the grasslands. Terrain includes: rolling prairie, badland terrain, woody draws, and high buttes. Animals found in the grasslands include: prairie dogs, eagle, falcons, elk, antelope, mule and white-tail deer. The only stand of limber pine in the state is just north of Marmarth. The only natural Ponderosa Pine Forest in the state is located west of Amidon.

***SOUTH UNIT THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK:*** The area was described in 1864 by Gen. Alfred Sully as “hell with the fires out.” The main access to the South Unit is through the historic town of Medora. North Dakota Badlands provide the scenic backdrop to this park. Named for the 26<sup>th</sup> President, it memorializes his contribution to conservation. Visitor’s center and Theodore Roosevelt’s cabin from the Maltese Cross Ranch. The loop drive could provide a view of buffalo, deer, elk, big-horn sheep, wild horses, mule deer and prairie dog towns.

**Other Optional ways to see the park:** Trail rides through the Badlands on the marked trails or the Maah Daah Hey Trail, Mountain biking through the Badlands on Maah Daah Hey Trail or Hiking along trails through the Badlands to see nature and wildlife.

**Chateau de Mores** - This 26-room, two-story frame building was built in 1883 as the summer residence of the Marquis’s family. The Chateau is now a historic house museum and contains many of the original furnishings and personal effects of the de Mores family. Located southwest of Medora, this site memorializes the life and activities in North Dakota of Antoine de Vallombrosa, the Marquis de Mores, who arrived in 1883. Among his enterprises were a beef packing plant, a stagecoach line, a freighting company, refrigerated railway cars, cattle and sheep raising, land ownership, and a new town which he called Medora, in honor of his wife.

Visits through the house are available during the summer months, and there is an admission charge. School and commercial bus tour group rates. Allow one hour for visit.

### **North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame**

The North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame (NDCHF) strives to preserve the history and promote the culture of North Dakota’s Native American, Ranching, & Rodeo communities by informing and educating people of all nations and cultures about the state’s rich and colorful western heritage.

The character and legacy of the American West comes to life inside the organization’s Center of Western Heritage & Cultures: Native American, Ranching and Rodeo located in Medora, North Dakota.

The 15,000-square foot interpretive center features permanent and traveling western culture exhibits, a Hall of Honorees, theater, gift shop, archives, conference room and a 5,000-square foot open-air patio.

Heading south toward South Dakota:

### **Buffalo Trails Tour**

At the center of the Northern Plains is a rugged section of Badlands, buttes and fertile grasslands where cattle and sheep graze, and the deer and antelope still roam. This region – bordered by the towns of Hettinger, N.D. and Lemmon, Bison and Buffalo, S.D. – is where Lakota and Dakota people conducted the last hunts of the majestic, wild buffalo that once roamed the grasslands in great herds.

**PRAIRIE THUNDER:** Visit Hettinger’s Chamber of Commerce for information on the Buffalo Trails Tour and start your journey with a visit to the buffalo mount “Prairie Thunder” at Dakota Buttes Museum in Hettinger. You’ll find him hard to miss. Prairie Thunder stands 5½ feet high at the shoulder and is 8½ feet from nose to tail. He was judged at close to 2,000 pounds and his horns span 30 inches at the widest point. The buffalo has long captured the imagination of people everywhere with its great size and stature, confrontational eye, beautifully-shaped black horns and semi-tragic history. William Hornaday probably described him best back in 1887: “The grandest of them all.”

**LAST STAND OF THE BUFFALO 1880-1883:** Site where the American buffalo made their last stand in a remote and beautiful valley and others like it within a radius of perhaps 30 or 40 miles. We call this the Butchering Site because of the many buffalo bones found here. A spectacular panorama opens out ahead and you can see for miles in every direction. In the distance, long ridges stretch across the horizon in waves, each wave a long divide of peaks, plateaus and flat-topped buttes. Imagine herds of buffalo grazing here and there into the distance. Nearby trees mark springs where native hunting parties left evidence of camps: tepee rings, arrowheads, tools and beads.

**HIDDENWOOD HUNT 1882:** This is where “The Last Great Buffalo Hunt” began on or about June 20, 1882, near Hiddenwood Cliff. Off to the east in the direction of Fort Yates is where most Lakota hunters came from, riding low and quiet up the creek. They had not yet caught sight of what was ahead – the huge buffalo herd the scouts told them was there. The large hunting party of 2,000 men, women and children had left Fort Yates, 100 miles east, on June 10, 1882, moving slowly. Six hundred hunters rode horseback. Others rode in horse-drawn wagons or travois pulled by horses or dogs. They killed 2,000 buffalo the first day and quick-butchered them on the second. By the third day, the herd had not moved far and hunters killed 3,000 buffalo that day. After making several camps near water, they cared for the meat and hung it out to dry in the hot sun.

**SHADEHILL BUFFALO JUMP:** The buffalo jump, an ancient hunting technique, took advantage of cliffs that commonly border creeks and rivers in the plains, as they do here above the Grand River. To view what is left of the Shadepill Buffalo Jump, look for the thick juniper trees on the highest cliffs above the lake. On the other side are drop-off cliffs and the slump of earth below the buffalo jump. A successful jump depended on having a large number of animals. It was impossible to stampede a small herd of buffalo over a jump-off. The leaders would see the danger and turn back or dodge off to the side. At the site, two layers of buffalo bones totaling 16 feet thick on the face of the cliff were clearly visible and well known locally. But during World War II, there was great demand for bones used in munitions. Many were recovered, loaded and shipped by railroad to munitions factories on the West Coast.

**LORE ON THE BLACKTAIL TRAIL:** A nice place to consider the complex relationship between the buffalo and the native peoples who lived here. Buffalo were a source of food and a social and cultural inspiration and connection to spiritual life. Blacktail Trail is a 7-mile walking loop for non-motorized use, constructed in 2004 by the Forest Service. Posts branded with deer antlers mark the trail. Interpretive signs give information on such topics as waterfowl, plants, wildflowers and the transition of this land from buffalo to cattle. Native Americans honor the buffalo in ceremonies, stories, artwork, song and dance. In traditional plains belief, buffalo gave themselves up willingly as food for the native people and provided many other gifts as well – shelter, clothing, medicine and tools.

**RESCUING FIVE CALVES:** This may well be the area where Pete Dupree and his family came with a buckboard wagon in early summer 1881 or 1882 to rescue buffalo calves. This noted rescue by Native Americans was likely here or within 30 miles of this beautiful grassland on the South Grand River as it was the only place where wild buffalo herds still ranged and also was fairly close to where the Duprees lived. By this time, American buffalo were nearly extinct. In 1887, Wm Hornaday made his official count of the surviving buffalo in a report to the Smithsonian, as published in his book *The Extinction of the American Bison* two years later. His careful tally listed only 1,091 head for all of North America, with the

largest herd being 200 in Yellowstone Park. Barely 500 lived in the U.S., and he added 550 from “very old rumors” of wood buffalo in Canada.

**SLIM BUTTE WINTER HUNT 1880-1881:** Winters on the Northern Plains vary from snowy, windy and cold to sunny and moderate. There is usually a January thaw—at least a week of warmer, thawing weather. Buffalo are well adapted to survive the harsh blizzards that sometimes hit the northern plains. In hard winters, buffalo face the storm, protected by their massive heads and shoulders, their strength and bulk. With forequarters well insulated by their heaviest hair growth, they stand or move slowly into the wind until the storm blows over. Their hair grows so dense that every square inch has 10 times as many hairs as an inch of cow hide. The Slim Buttes are a delightful place for reenacting history, as well as hiking, camping and picnicking. A beautiful, higher-altitude area of pine hills, it’s a great place to spend a morning or afternoon. Find a scenic place where you might enjoy viewing buffalo – or joining the hunt if you imagine you were riding with the Lakota hunters and Thomas Riggs. Their hunting trip lasted months, so most any place you choose in and near the buttes recreates that hunt.

**VIEWING BUFFALO BEHAVIOR:** There’s nothing quite like seeing live buffalo up close and personal – with sensible regard for safe distances, of course. You are welcome to stop along public roads to view buffalo, which are large, strong, unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Admire them from afar, but do not approach. Do not enter pastures with buffalo or drive through gates without permission.

**BUFFALO OR BISON, WHAT SHOULD WE CALL THEM:** The consensus is: call them what you are comfortable with, what you like best. And don’t feel guilty if that’s “buffalo.” It’s a mistake to think they “should” be called “bison.” The first buffalo herds arrived in North America about 43,000 years ago, crossing from Asia on the Bering Land Bridge in Alaska. One giant bison species stood one-fifth larger than our modern buffalo with horns 10 feet across. Most of these large mammals – including all buffalo species except one – vanished around 9,000 years ago, a mass extinction that is still a mystery. Modern American buffalo developed into two subspecies – the prolific plains buffalo of the open country and the shy wood buffalo of the forests and far north. Thus under scientific classification, the American plains buffalo is listed as genus *Bison*, species *bison*, and subspecies *bison* or *Bison bison bison*. The wood buffalo is *Bison bison athabasca*.

### **Buffalo vs Bison? What shall we call them?**

What shall we call this magnificent Monarch of the Plains—buffalo or bison?

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## **South Dakota**

Get ready to visit historical monuments like [Mount Rushmore](#) and [Crazy Horse Memorial](#), see the Old West come to life in historic [Deadwood](#), and experience plenty of brag-worthy encounters with nature—where else can you say you were caught in a traffic jam because a herd of wild buffalo decided to cross in front of your car? Leave your trusty GPS behind (there's no reception in the mountains, anyway!), break out the old road map, grab your friends and family—or take on the adventure solo like I did—and whatever you do, don't forget your camera.

## **WALL & BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK**

From [Rapid City](#) Regional Airport, it's about an hour drive to [Wall](#), a funky little town that's home to [Wall Drug](#), an area institution since 1931 where you'll find everything from souvenir shops to a giant animated T-Rex, and plenty of space for the kids to unwind after a long day on the road. Stop by the Western Art Gallery Restaurant for their famous homemade donuts, bison burgers, and five-cent coffee. The best part: admission is free, as is the ice water—a marketing tool that has brought in visitors since the 1930s. As you leave Wall, stay on Highway 240 and head south into [Badlands National Park](#) along the [Badlands Loop Scenic Byway](#), driving west to east through some of the most amazing prairie

landscapes and impressive canyons in the country. Keep an eye out for bison, pronghorn, deer, eagles, prairie dogs, and hawks as you drive and be prepared to pull over every time there's a sign that says, "Scenic overlook." Trust me. The park is never too crowded and you can spend hours just admiring the views around you in relative peace and quiet. Stick around for the evening program, usually around 9 p.m., where kids can meet Smokey the Bear, stargaze, and learn about how the park was formed. Park entrance fees are valid for seven days: \$15 per vehicle, \$10 for motorcycles, \$7 for hikers and bicyclists, or \$30 for an annual pass. Stay at [Frontier Cabins](#), located just off I-90 on the way into Badlands National Park (rates from \$108-\$149 per cabin from May-August; lower in shoulder season months).

#### BEAR BUTTE STATE PARK & DEADWOOD

Cruise down I-90, turn off at Highway 79, and drive through [Sturgis](#) on the way to [Bear Butte State Park](#). While a popular hiking spot for travelers, the site is still considered to be sacred to Native Americans—as the ranger in the Visitor Center explained it to me, hiking up Bear Butte is kind of like going to church, so remember to be respectful.

It's only about a 30-minute drive heading the opposite way on Highway 79 from here to [Deadwood](#), but you might as well be driving 200 years back in time to the Old West. Visit during the summer to see the [Days of '76 PRCA Rodeo](#)—you can still go to the [Days of '76 Museum](#) year-round to see exhibits about Deadwood's first settlers (admission is \$5.50 for adults, \$2.50 for children ages 7-13, while children ages six and under get in free). Stroll around town—a dead ringer for any western town you've ever seen in the movies—and take the [Alkali Ike Tour](#) around historic Deadwood and up to [Mt. Moriah Cemetery](#) to see the gravestones of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane—real, legendary characters who once called Deadwood home (\$10 for adults, \$5 for ages 6-16, \$9 for seniors). Catch a free reenactment of an Old West shootout in front of the [Franklin Hotel](#) (several times a day, just follow the crowd!) and witness the shooting of Wild Bill Hickok inside [Saloon #10](#) daily at 1 p.m., 3 p.m., 5 p.m., and 7 p.m. Their website proudly states, "Bring the kids!" Stay at the [Springhill Suites by Marriott](#), located on Main Street about a 15-minute walk from the historic downtown area (rooms from \$79 a night).

#### MOUNT RUSHMORE & CUSTER STATE PARK

Take a scenic ride down Highway 385, then Highway 16, and follow the signs to [Mount Rushmore National Memorial](#), one of America's most iconic attractions featuring the larger-than-life faces of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln carved into the side of the mountain. Take a walk on the boardwalk trails that lead up to the base of the mountain for a better view, and stop by Carver's Café for lunch and the chance to try out Thomas Jefferson's original ice cream recipe! (Admission to the park is free, but you must pay \$11 to park your vehicle).

Drive along gorgeous rolling prairies, twisting mountain roads, and past iconic American monuments like Mount Rushmore in this spectacular corner of South Dakota.

Drive along Iron Mountain Road, or Alt. 16, a winding two-lane road that will take you through one-lane tunnels (honk first!) and past beautiful mountain vistas. As you get closer to the park, get your cameras ready—buffalo roam in and around [Custer State Park](#) and will often decide to randomly cross in front of your car. Resist the temptation and only take photos from inside your vehicle—these animals are majestic but strong and big enough to cause some major damage. Pay \$4 per person to enter Custer State Park and stay in the middle of all the action at the [State Game Lodge](#), the former Summer White House for President Calvin Coolidge in 1927 (room rates from \$115 a night in June for a lodge room). While you're there, sign up for a Buffalo Safari Jeep Tour to get up close to the park's resident buffalo, prairie dogs, and other wildlife on a bumpy, off-road adventure through the native wilderness. End the day with a chuck wagon cookout in the wild, where cowboys sing as you feast on your choice of sirloin steak or hamburger, beans, cornbread, potato salad, coleslaw, watermelon, and fresh lemonade (\$85 per adult and \$65 for children under 12 for the combination Jeep Tour and Chuck Wagon Cookout; \$45 per adult and \$38 for children under 12 for just the Jeep Tour; \$49 per adult and \$40 for children under 12 for just the Chuck Wagon Cookout).

#### CRAZY HORSE MEMORIAL, HILL CITY & RAPID CITY

Drive along Needles Highway (Highway 87), another mountain road with several one-lane tunnels and beautiful views of Sylvan Lake along the way. When you get to the end of Highway 87, turn left and head south on Highway 385/16 for about 20 minutes to [Crazy Horse Memorial](#). Started in 1948 as a way to pay homage to the legendary Lakota leader and our nations' Native American heritage, Crazy Horse Memorial is funded by admissions and donations rather than the U.S. Government—the upside being, it will never close if there is another National Parks shutdown, the downside being the stone carving is still a work in progress. Tour the Indian Museum of North America and the Native American Educational and Cultural Center while you're there, and stop by the restaurant for the best Tatanka Stew in the area—people kept telling me to try it at Mount Rushmore and Custer State Park the day before! (\$10 for adults, \$27 per carload, \$5 for motorcycles, and free for children under age six, Native Americans, active military members, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in uniform, and all residents of Custer County, South Dakota). Visit the [Black Hills Institute of Geological Research](#) in [Hill City](#) on your way back towards [Rapid City](#) on Highway 385/16—it's 20 minutes up the road and kids will love seeing enormous dinosaur skeletons and a room full of shiny gemstones (admission is \$7.50 for adults ages 16 and up, \$6 for seniors, veterans, and U.S. military members, \$4 for children ages 6-15, and free for children ages five and under). From here, it's a half-hour drive on Highway 16 into Rapid City, home to the [Museum of the American Bison](#) [now located at Crazy Horse Memorial], a vibrant [downtown](#) with concerts and outdoor festivals year-round, and have your picture taken with life-size bronze statues of your favorite former Presidents that line the streets of the historic district. Stay at the [Adoba Eco Hotel](#) Rapid City, a newly renovated hotel that is stylish and eco-friendly (room rates from \$99 a night).