

South Dakota – a land of family, history, endless fun

By Kathryn Reed

CUSTER STATE PARK, S.D. – Where the buffalo roam, granite presidents dominate, Indians try to assimilate and families reunite.

South Dakota. It's my home and I've never lived there. That's what happens when your parents are high school sweethearts, your three sisters are born there and family reunions are scheduled every five years.

And I'm OK with that.



Buffalo enjoy the grass inside Custer State Park. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The Black Hills is gorgeous, with a ruggedness and beauty that conjure images of the Sierra and Rockies – it's all the granite and pines.

And just like the more famous destinations, the Black Hills is a recreation spot for all things outdoors.

One morning is spent hiking to the top of Harney Peak –

elevation 7,242. It's the highest peak west of the Pyrenees. The 6-mile roundtrip trek provides stunning views of The Hills, especially from the lookout tower at the top.

The youngest to complete the trip – albeit with some help from his dad – is my 4-year-old grandnephew. And the oldest is my mom, at age 76.

We've been spending several days every five years in Custer State Park cabins since the 1990s.

It's a bittersweet trip this time. We are burying my dad's ashes. My parents have had plots in The Hills for years. It makes my connection to this part of the world so much stronger now.

While the family changes – in appearance and numbers – we have a closeness I cherish. Some I see in between these gatherings, for others this is the only opportunity. We are dispersed across the world.

We meet at Mount Rushmore to see The Faces as the sun is setting and stay for the lighting. (This is a must for anyone who visits.) Five years ago we were there for Fourth of July fireworks – something magical about being someplace so American on that holiday.

I can't count the times I have seen those four stone presidents. I never get tired of going there. Partly it's the knowledge environmentalists would never allow something like this to be chiseled again, partly because we could never agree whose faces to carve, and partly it's the sense of patriotism that envelops me.

Earlier we had visited Crazy Horse, the even larger carving of the Sioux Indian who won the Battle of Little Big Horn over Custer. Although it's hard for me to tell the change in five years, clearly there has been some. I keep wondering if I'll see its completion in my lifetime.

Custer State Park isn't like any state park I've been to in California. It feels like a National Park. President Calvin Coolidge considered it his summer home.

A herd of about 1,300 bison call the 71,000-acre park home. They are best viewed along the 18-mile Wildlife Loop Road.

Mom has to tell us not to get out of the car – yes, even at our age.

Burros, prairie dogs, antelope and deer are other animals along the route.

One of the things about this part of the Midwest is there is so much to do – from touristy sites that take your money, to paddling on Sylvan Lake which is walking distance from our cabin, to checking out Rapid City.

Maybe I should have voted to return in three years instead of five.

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