



## The Black Hills of South Dakota Is Ground Zero for Your Old West Adventure Vacation

By [RJ Wattenhofer](#) | Submitted On December 25, 2011



Nowhere else in the United States will you find an area so steeped in old west folklore, art, mystique and tradition that the moment you arrive your mind can't help but shed the illusion of pseudo-happiness garnered from modern creature comforts and begin to absorb the reality of what life was truly like for our Nineteenth Century forebears.

This was life at its most raw and only the toughest, most leather-skinned men and women survived. It wasn't easy but it was real and it brought a joy that only a true cowboy would realize: Living each moment to the fullest, constantly testing your grit and facing your problems head-on in an environment ready-made to chew up & spit out the weak. These folks were forged in steel, pounded relentlessly by an unforgiving land and instilled with a fortitude, strength & genuine happiness that you and I can only imagine.

Rated as one of the top five most dangerous towns of the old west, Deadwood, South Dakota can be summed up in one word: Attitude. The cowboy's attitude was the litmus test which determined if he would survive a confrontation or be left lying in the dirt to feed the buzzards. Could he stare down some mean-spirited cuss and make him walk away with his tail between his legs? You bet he could, if he intended to walk away himself.

This is the town where famed gunfighter and lawman James "Wild Bill" Hickok was shot dead while playing his last hand of poker, the famous Dead Man's Hand: Two black aces and two black eights. Frontier scout Calamity Jane roamed these deadly streets, as did hard-as-nails sheriff Seth Bullock.

Gold was the birth mother of this rowdy town, and where goes gold so goes violence and corruption. Running through a treacherous gulch full of dead wood was a creek rich in gold, the likes of which not seen since the heydays of California. It drew every roughneck and sidewinder from every corner of the country, itching to carve out their own piece of the prize. It was not uncommon for territorial disputes to be settled by a bullet.

Tourists can still walk the underground Broken Boot Gold Mine and view the veins plundered by miners more than a century ago. You can even pan for gold if that is to your liking. And, sticking to their gambling tradition, several historic gaming halls are available where you can try your luck at a hand of cards; just make sure to keep your back to the wall...

Located a few miles from the town of Keystone is the famous Mount Rushmore National Monument. A grandiose conception fully realized in even grander magnitude, these sixty foot heads carved into the mountainside granite are breathtaking. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln stand as testaments to the ingenuity and perseverance of the American spirit. As impressive as the sight of this massive stone sculpture is, the actual work behind their construction is even more awe-inspiring.

The initial dynamite blasting and carving began in 1927 and finished (due to lack of federal funding) in 1941, for a total of fourteen years of grueling, backbreaking labor, along with several tragic, dramatic deaths that are par for the course in this sort of momentous undertaking. This writer's first job after high school graduation was working at the concession located at the base of Mount Rushmore. It was a wonderful way to spend the summer, soaking up the old west culture and history and later, as a reward for our efforts, the employees were taken on a special guided tour to the very top of the sculpture. Here I was allowed to stand at the precipice of Jefferson's head and, for the first time, completely comprehend what it must have been like to dangle in the air with hammer and chisel, a few feet of tenuous rope securing you against a fatal fall to the jagged rocks below.

Not to be outdone, a few miles down the road is the Crazy Horse Memorial. Touted as the world's largest mountain carving, this sculpture of Oglala Lakota Chief Crazy Horse (still very much in its infancy) is a tribute to the Native American people's unyielding spirit in the face of incredible adversity. Along with the sculpture itself is an impressive Indian Museum of North American History, which displays artifacts of American Indian nations from across the United States.

Travel Southwest of Rapid City to Custer and you will arrive at Jewel Cave National Monument. This cave is unique to the United States for several different reasons: Not only is it the second-longest cave in the world (one hundred-fifty miles, with much of the labyrinthine interior still uncharted), it also hosts the planet's most impressive collection of dogtooth, nailhead and calcite spar crystals; hence the name Jewel Cave. The tour is a half mile long, looping back after a ninety minute excursion into its pristine depths.

This is just a handful of sights and activities for you to partake in on your travels through the Black Hills of South Dakota. So, Cowboy Up! and get ready for an amazing historic journey to this country's number one old west vacation destination. And remember: Keep your powder dry, partner.

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