

Badlands National Park, South Dakota

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Good Travel in the Badlands

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Pre-historic peoples hunted in them and then left. The Sioux all but avoided them, calling them *mako sica* – "land bad" in the Lakota language. French trappers similarly described them *mauvaises terres à traverser* – "bad lands to travel across." An American exploratory party nearly perished of thirst in 1823, and some two decades passed before the next known travelers ventured through. Homesteaders shunned them as uninhabitable, and westward-bound emigrants steered clear. Finally, mid- to late-19th-century paleontologists were smitten, enduring the discomfort of a dry and difficult climate to collect a treasure trove of fossils from them. Today, a million visitors a year come to explore their singular and dramatic beauty.

"They" are the White River Badlands. This arid, wind- and water-eroded landscape in south-central South Dakota forms the nucleus of 240,000-acre Badlands National Park. The geologic and scenic wonder surrounded by the grasslands of the Great Plains that was so daunting in the past draws present-day visitors and last year, I was of them. The park, which feels remote and wild, is stunningly accessible – just off Interstate 90, the mainline across the northern United States, and less than an hour from Rapid City.

When I first saw the Badlands, I understood how they got their name. To my eyes, they were a discordant jumble of cliffs, fins, spires, arches, buttes, towers and rocky knobs which nature has sculpted into improbable shapes. Until recently, humans have understandably trod lightly on this stark and inhospitable land, but a rewind back millions of years reveals times when this area teemed with life. To scientists, the Badlands are an open book. Paleontologists have found a mother lode of fossils, and geologists look at this heavily eroded and confusing landscape and study layer upon layer of compacted and dried mud, clay and silt. They have deduced that the Black Hills rose to the west some 65 million years ago and then were eroded by torrential rivers that carried rocky debris into the valley below. With climatic changes, marshlands, then forests and finally grasslands followed. Some 35 million years ago, dinosaurs thrived there. They and other life forms were entombed under layers of debris and fossilized.

A "mere" million years ago, the sedimentation stopped, and first erratic streams and then a new generation of powerful rivers began cutting through the prairie, and slowly, the unique landscape we now call the Badlands emerged. The erosive forces continue to this day. During each rainstorm, water flows off the stone, gathering into intermittent rills and streams that flow into the White, Bad and Cheyenne Rivers. Every

windstorm whips around the protruding formations. And snows pack into crevices, fissures and pockets in the rock, thawing, freezing and ultimately fracturing the rock.

In terms of acreage, the majority of Badlands National Park is grassland, where prairie animals and wonderful seasonal wildflowers can be seen under a big-sky canopy. But grassland isn't why I, or most visitors, come to the park. The main draw is the Badlands themselves, located in the northernmost of the park's three sections. They are dramatic at any time, but the most spectacular times are sunrise and sunset, when slanting sunlight plays on the rock, turning it the most exquisite shades of pink, mauve, cream and russet.

Badlands Loop Road twists 35 miles between the park's Northeast Entrance (8½ miles from I-90, Exit 131) and Pinnacles Entrance (8½ miles from Exit 110), passing scenic overlooks and trailheads. The park offers some grueling hikes for the fit and adventurous, but also some gentle walks that nonetheless display the best of the Badlands, including two wheelchair-accessible routes of just a quarter-mile each. The Fossil Trail features fossils displayed under protective domes, while the Window Trail leads to a natural window with a view of an severely eroded canyon. Rangers like to say that the nearby 2/3-mile Door Trail "shows the Badlands at their baddest" – stark, intimidating and stunning, all at the same time. "It looks like Hell with the fires burned out" is an old description of the Badlands – and I agree, adding that this particular Hell may be rugged, but it is a magnificent place.

IF YOU GO

For information, contact Badlands National Park, P.O. Box 6, Interior, SD 57750-0006; (605) 433- 5361 or www.nps.gov/badl.

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