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Opposite: A mountain with profound spiritual significance

Bear Butte

South Dakota

A SACRED MOUNTAIN FOR GENERATIONS OF NATIVE AMERICANS



layers millions of years ago, is an important sacred site for many Native American tribes.

The Lakota Sioux call it *Mato Paha* or Bear Mountain. For centuries they have come here for spiritual inspiration, steeping the mountain in countless prayers. On the public trail to the top are many reminders that this is holy ground. Almost every tree and bush is draped with colorful prayer flags and strung with tiny bundles of tobacco.

It’s a rigorous 3-mile round-trip hike to the 4426-foot Bear Butte summit, but it has an indefinable quality that elicits a sense of wonder.

Crossing the South Dakota plains from the east, you’ll see the granite domes and dark pine forests of the Black Hills gradually materialize on the horizon. Standing apart is a worn and ancient mountain, rising over the prairie as if guarding the approach. Among the many scenic attractions in the Black Hills, Bear Butte doesn’t take top billing, but for many here, it’s of enormous spiritual importance. This mass of igneous rock, which pushed up through sedimentary

- GO IF YOU LIKE...**
- ♥ *Native American history*
 - ♥ *sacred sites*
 - ♥ *wildlife spotting*
 - ♥ *hiking*
 - ♥ *the Black Hills*
 - ♥ *fishing*

Why go to Bear Butte?

‘This mountain is a dynamic and living cathedral. It is a Sacred Place. We are all visitors at this special place.’ So reads the sign at the entrance to Bear Butte State Park. Native Americans say that spiritual awakenings can and will occur on the hike up to the summit. As you climb the trail, passing small clusters of tough ponderosa pine and juniper trees, you may even hear the sound of ceremonial drums – a faint heartbeat that seems to resonate from deep within the rocks.

To cap off this ethereal experience, spend the night at one of the campsites nestled near the base of the mountain, watching the sunlight fade into star-pricked darkness. And when you wake, take advantage of the other activities nearby. Go boating at Bear Butte Lake, fish off the pier and wave at the local herd of bison. Or why not climb the butte one last time?



GETTING THERE

Bear Butte State Park is located just 15 minutes northeast of the town of Sturgis, off Hwy 79. The nearest major airport is Rapid City, which is an hour’s drive away. You’ll need your own wheels.

WHEN TO GO

May – Oct

Summer vacation (Jun–Aug) is high season, so you may see something that vaguely resembles a crowd. The Sturgis Motorcycle Rally takes place in early August, attracting half a million bikers annually.

Bottom, left: Granite spires in Custer State Park; **right:** offerings and prayer flags at Bear Butte. **Opposite:** Lakota chief Red Cloud made a pilgrimage to Bear Butte



FIRST-TIME TIPS

Visit the Educational Center, open May until September, which highlights the mountain’s geology, history and the cultural beliefs of the Northern Plains Indians.

As a sacred site for over 30 Native American tribes, Bear Butte often hosts prayer ceremonies. Visitors should be respectful and refrain from taking photographs.

There are 15 campsites located in Bear Butte State Park, but they do not take reservations. It’s first come, first served only.

If you visit in September, be sure to hit the nearby Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup. Around 1300 bison are herded into corrals during this spectacular event.

AMAZING CROWD-FREE EXPERIENCES



Take the Lake Trail (the other hiking trail in the park), which is just over 2 miles long and circles Bear Butte Lake. You probably won’t see another soul.



Lace up your hiking boots and head out on the northernmost section of the 111-mile Centennial Trail, which traverses the park.



Keep an eagle eye out for local wildlife, including deer, bison, porcupines and rattlesnakes. Bird-watching might snare you a mountain bluebird, northern flicker woodpecker or spotted towhee.



Get lost amid the granite spires and domes of the 71,000-acre Custer State Park, less than one hour away.



Reminisce about hogs of old at the nearby Sturgis Motorcycle Museum, which showcases unique and historic motorcycles that date back to 1905.



Cast a line into Bear Butte Lake to catch northern pike, white crappie, yellow bullhead and yellow perch.