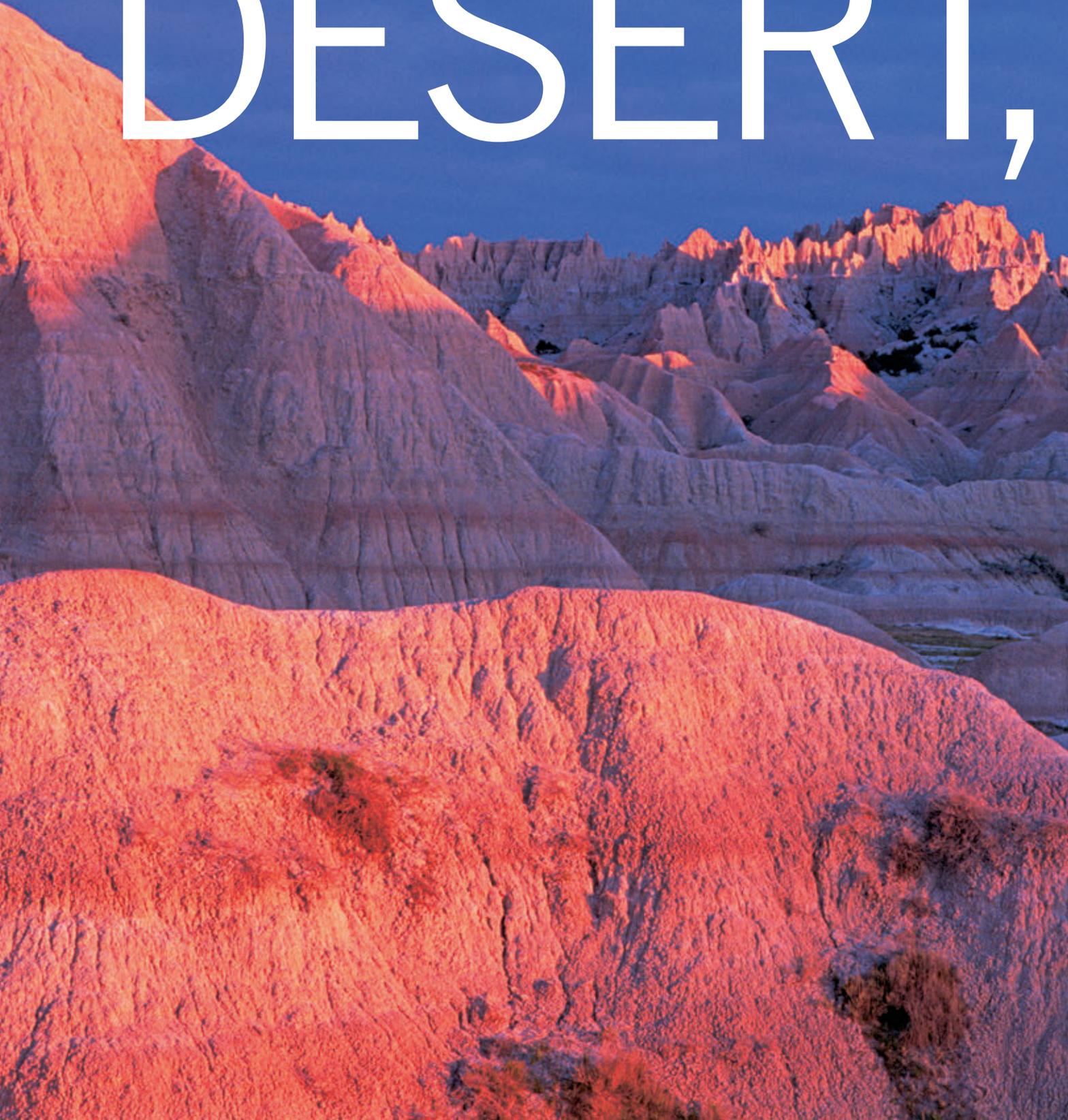


# ALMOST DESERT,



# A NEVER THE SAME



**RYAN MURDOCK** DISCOVERS  
SOUTH DAKOTA'S BADLANDS,  
WHERE THE BIG SKY RACES  
TIME AND TIME STANDS STILL  
PHOTOS: **JASON GEORGE**

**BEFORE MY INITIATION, I EXPECTED SOUTH DAKOTA** to be prairie-flat and prairie-dull. I expected cowboys, Indians and dude ranches where big city office managers dress up and play Old West. I was apprehensive. I just couldn't imagine anything more.

Standing on the Pinnacles Overlook at Badlands National Park, I dropped these conventions over the cliff. Beyond the metal railing the ground fell away to a convolution of eccentric geology—the bones of the Earth laid bare. The spiny vertebra, the dried-up veins and the land's wrinkled skin were worn open, exposed on God's dissection table. Crumbling formations were striped with alternating bands of lavender and pink. Mud-brown soared into buttes and pillars and plunged into ragged bluffs. The travelling eye wandered and split over the fissures of dry creeks. Too much detail. From above it was overwhelming. A cacophony of colours, shapes and crazy angles.

The Badlands are too bizarre to process. They don't make sense.

The Sioux called this region *mako sica*—"land bad." The first white men to bump up against it were French fur trappers, on their way across the prairies. They called it *les mauvaises terres à traverses*—"the bad land to cross." It was always an obstacle, a place you stayed away from.

"Ready?"

"You betcha."

I threaded rope through my carabiner and kicked off in a clattering crumble of dirt. Caleb Gilkerson of Dakota Adventures followed me down. We had tied on to the railing of the visitor overlook. The RV tourists in Bermuda shorts watched us with incredulity.

**LLIONS OF YEARS AGO, AFTER A VAST INLAND SEA** receded from the centre of this continent, the Badlands were part of an enormous marsh. Dinosaurs and other beasts waded and wandered through this area, luxuriating in tropical heat. Eventually they died and were gradually covered by sediment. Other creatures came as the millennia wore on: three-toed horses, a variety of small camel, and saber-tooth tigers. In time their bones became entombed in the land, much to the gratification of present-day fossil hunters.

As the marsh dried up the Great Plains emerged. Over the course of five million years, streams carved into the soft prairie soil and harsh western winds chiselled the soft rock into fantastic spires, turrets and pinnacles. Today clumps of withered grass clinging to the tops of these buttes and pinnacles serve as a reminder that these isolated peaks were once part of the smooth alluvial plain. Contrary to their barren appearance, the Badlands are not desert but prairie.

The Badlands are mostly composed of mudstone (the dark bands laid down during dry times) and siltstone (light bands, the product of wetter eras), with the occasional tough sandstone outcropping—all on a base of shale. Together they form a surface that's hard to the touch but easily crumbled by water. This land is being cut by water and wind erosion at a rate of about a centimetre a year, so like the ancient inland sea and the megaswamps before them, the Badlands will one day vanish in deep rivers of time—though thankfully for hikers, not for several million years.

**DOWN ON THE BADLANDS FLOOR OUR BOOTS CRUNCHED** layers of hard-packed compressed mud. Heat waves shimmered from the field-of-Mars landscape. An unbreachable wall towered

into a bristling mountain range beyond the flats, and sea-island clumps baked themselves brown in the middle of the frozen mud sea.

Grim formations menaced overhead. The Mordor-like gloom held a heavy silence. You could come face to face with a buffalo without hearing a warning sound. The visuals, however, were more disorienting than the atmosphere. To walk across this bizarre terrain was to be dwarfed, to suffer a sense of total dislocation. There was no human perspective, no scale. It didn't relate to anything I'd seen before, and it took me out of myself.

Caleb and I had dropped into a sci-fi novel.

We followed animal tracks—mule deer, buffalo, coyote and the elusive bobcat. We scanned the ground for fossils and petrified wood. We scrambled up twisted formations for a peek at what was up there. We ran back down, hopping from side to sloping side, laughing uncontrollably at the exhilaration of letting instinct choose our footing. It was too steep and crumbling for a safe, slow descent. Once begun it was better to continue, for fear of starting a rockslide that would flay you alive.

Hours later we sat sweat-soaked and dry-throated on the edge of a high plateau that we'd climbed through sheer will. Behind us the Badlands wall plummeted to the swaying green expanse of Buffalo Gap National Grassland. Far to the right a desiccated brown finger poked out into the plain.

We chose the other view, across the tortured ground we'd just covered: canyons and dry gullies, shale falls, mushrooms of scoriasceous rock, shadowed cliff-side wedges and windswept buttes. As the sun slid across the gunmetal sky, the colours and shapes of the Badlands changed. It was constantly transforming itself, hour by hour. The way out didn't look the same as it did on the way in. Perspectives were skewed. And when your bearings are shaken loose—those mental bearings that shape your life's orderly direction—then the rest is soon to follow.

**AT 27, CALEB GILKERSON MUST BE THE YOUNGEST** outdoor expert on South Dakota. In fact, he's only one of the experts in his immediate family, which has long ties to the guiding world. Gilkerson's uncles helped found the South Dakota Guide Association, and in 2000 Caleb took over the shop and began spending his summers guiding fishermen.

"Walleye, salmon and pike fishermen. Didn't care for it much," he said, talking about his past guiding experience. "Those guys expect to go out there, and every day it's sunny and fine. Every day the fish are bitin'. A lot of 'em take it outta my ass when they find it ain't like that."

He spit a plug of tobacco and swigged water from a duct-taped





# THE BADLANDS CONTAINS A SEEMINGLY ENDLESS SUPPLY OF MICRO-WORLDS WITHIN WORLDS, FODDER FOR FUTURE JOURNEYS AND EXPLORATION DREAMS.

**LEFT:** Caleb Gilkerson and the author disappear into the Badlands near Cedar Pass

**BELOW:** Wind and water erosion cause natural “mushroom” formations as the ground is literally eaten out from under harder rock.



Nalgene bottle. “I wanted to do somethin’ new so I got into the paddling scene—canoeing and kayaking. I really love being able to put in on a river and take out someplace totally different. It’s a great way to spend the summer. Hell, I’m out here to enjoy it just as much as anyone.”

Gilkerson’s manner had the bluntness of all true outdoorsmen: a reluctance to waste time on trifles and an honesty that cuts to the bone. I knew we’d get along from our first trip-planning phone conversation. “I’m not much for cookin’,” he had said. “We won’t starve or nothin’. But I hope you won’t be expectin’ no gourmet meals.”

There’s a heavy stillness in the Badlands. The constant prairie wind brings with it the smell of distance and green things. Sounds carry. The song of a single bird pierces the silence. Boots crunch on gravel and clop hollowly on stream-smooth stones. A hawk circles speck-high on a column of rising air. Its cry is clear and pure.

The land looks desolate, but it supports a delicate life. The Badlands has always been a place suited for nomads. Perhaps that’s why I feel so comfortable here.

It doesn’t encourage you to put down roots.

**WE HIKED BACK TOWARDS THE OVERLOOK AS THE** afternoon waned. Climbing over the side of a tall square butte we came face to face with two great shaggy buffalo grazing on tufts of grass. They paused to watch us with frozen attention.

We froze too.

“Stand still,” Gilkerson said. “Looks like two big males. Probably got driven out of their herd. They may run away if we come closer, but they may not.”

Each year in South Dakota several people are killed in buffalo encounters. They’re said to be the most dangerous game animal in the lower 48 states. The males can weigh as much as 1,000 kilograms and can easily outrun a horse. Though they appear

docile, they pack a hidden irritability that can flare up with little warning. It's best to stay out of their way.

"Keep in mind that a buffalo can get up pretty much anythin' you can out here." Gilkerson watched through squinting eyes. The great beasts went back to cropping grass. "I think we're okay to go a little closer. Just watch the tail. If it starts to go up it means they're gettin' a little agitated."

We dropped below the edge of the butte and crept around the side to prairie dog our heads over the nearest lip. Gilkerson slid a digicam from his pack. "They're such majestic creatures," he said. "I don't know how anyone could shoot one. Just imagine what it must have been like, the plains covered with them. I wish I could have seen that."

The nearest buffalo lifted a heavy rear leg to scratch its shaggy head. It went back to munching grass—bite and step, bite and step, in a straight line towards us. "Do you think he knows we're here?" I whispered.

"I don't think so, but he looks like a crafty one. Just be ready to move fast."

A musty smell of fur mixed with stale, grassy breath drifted over on the slight breeze. I could hear the rasping bellows of its enormous lungs, the tug and crunch of grass between huge rounded molars. As it grazed closer it came within a few metres, filling our horizon like a hairy Badlands formation. Then Gilkerson's camera malfunctioned, emitting a sharp beep.

The big buffalo's head snapped up and its angry eyes met mine.

"Run!" Gilkerson yelled, but I was already scrambling over the side.

## THE BLACK HILLS HAD BEEN PROMISED TO THE

Lakota people "in perpetuity," but the sudden gold rush put an end to the already dubious treaties. Settlers edged in to stake their claims, bringing with them families as well as hopes and dreams. Legendary towns like Deadwood sprang up to tap the wealth, and settlers cut timber from the hills. In the treeless expanse of the Great Plains, the Black Hills were an oasis of building materials.

The Lakota were pushed out, with a fight. But in the end they too, like so many other tribes, were lured into dependency on the white man's trading posts. They were herded onto reservations, and a great age in the life of the Black Hills ended as another began: the age of mining and timber towns, railroads and ranches.

When the mines dried up so did the towns. Their traces remain.

An abandoned log church comes into view on a sloping hillside. The town of Mystic slumbers around the bend of a nearby side road. Rusting machinery pokes through tall grass. Crumbling foundations slide into sagging holes like lips into aged gums. It's difficult to imagine the whine of sawmills and the rowdy miners' bars when the only sound is a sighing of the wind through the pines.

Now, recreation has replaced nature's products as the main source of income. This latest age was ushered in when Gutzon Borglum began work on the vast presidential busts of Mount Rushmore in 1927. Just as towns sprang up to service the gold rush, sprawling miles of tourist kitsch arrived to capitalize on Rushmore. The Black Hills became an RVer's paradise.

Road-tripping past the great monument on your way across the country? Why not make a brief detour to Reptile Gardens? ("This ain't no petting zoo!") Wouldn't the kids love Gulches of Fun Amusement Park in Deadwood? And who could pass by the Circle B Ranch and Chuckwagon Supper and Music Show without stopping? The Black Hills specializes in fun for the whole



family. Everyone leaves with a pair of Mt. Rushmore nail clippers or a set of Presidential shot glasses.

OUR FIRST VENTURE INTO THE BADLANDS WAS EXPLORATORY scouting; our second was a proper expedition. We loaded down with 60 pounds of gear each, even more for intrepid photographer Jason George, and pushed a quick march of five hours to set up a base camp. We wanted to explore an enormous flat butte, the tallest structure out there, visible from the overlook.

After two hours of hard sloging we cut across a smaller butte through long dry grass.

Gilkerson cleared the dust from his throat. "Be careful not to step on a rattlesnake," he said, then added, "Well, you can step on 'em. Just make sure it's the head."

He pinched a plug of mint-flavoured Skoal between two



**“KEEP IN MIND THAT A BUFFALO CAN GET UP PRETTY MUCH ANYTHIN’ YOU CAN OUT HERE.” GILKERSON WATCHED THROUGH SQUINTING EYES. THE BIG BUFFALO’S HEAD SNAPPED UP AND ITS ANGRY EYES MET MINE. “RUN!” GILKERSON YELLED, BUT I WAS ALREADY SCRAMBLING OVER THE SIDE.**

fingers and flipped it behind his lower lip. It was something I’d watched him do regularly over the past few days.

“How did you ever develop such a habit?” I asked. “It seems to me that anyone who would chew tobacco is only a step away from eating shit.”

He shrugged and grinned. “I started to chew ‘cause I couldn’t smoke in school.” He picked up a fragmented animal jaw from the ground, brushed it off, and stuck it behind his bottom lip so that one jagged tooth poked out.

“Aww, chew never hurt me none,” he said in a thick South Dakota accent, and then broke into a laughing fit.

**NOON IN THE BADLANDS IS UNFORGIVING; NIGHT IS** mysterious. The disorienting interplay of twilight shadows gives way to a brilliant star field that seems close enough to brush

the tops of the geologic spires. A feral moon paints the tortured landscape pale. The silence is total. You wake cold in the frosty night to the weighty tread and nostril-huff of heavy shaggy beasts plodding past in the dark. Morning tracks reveal broad pancake-size holes in the mud crust nearby.

The smaller tracks of several coyotes passed closer still.

**WE LEFT CAMP EARLY IN THE MORNING, TRAVELLING** light, carrying only water and energy bars, primed for the uncharted territory ahead. Clumped between the butte and us was the tallest range of formations we’d encountered.

We climbed a steep drainage cut and entered an unsuspected, invisible-from-below world of broad ledges and terraces, a world inhabited by high-country creatures, totally untrammelled by buffalo or human. The Badlands contains a seemingly endless



## WHAT MATTERED WAS THE JOURNEY, THE MOMENT. WE'D DEVELOPED A FEEL FOR THE BADLANDS, A SENSE OF HOW TO CLIMB AND WALK THE FORMATIONS, AND HOW TO FIND OUR WAY BACK TO WHERE WE'D STARTED.

supply of micro-worlds within worlds, fodder for future journeys and exploration dreams.

We crouched down to watch a trio of majestic bighorn sheep suspended on a cliff side, dismayed at our presence in their lofty haven. We scrambled up steep slopes and edged along ledges far too narrow to be safe, barely looking at the enormous void below. We sensed that our enthusiasm would carry us along, that the glorious feeling of exploration was too charmed to be broken by something as worldly as injury.

By the time the afternoon shadows lengthened my throat was hoarse from shouting and my limbs hung heavy. We had covered a lot of ground, but we never made it to that tall flat butte. The destination was arbitrary, anyway. What mattered was the journey, the moment. We'd developed a feel for the Badlands, a sense of how to climb and walk the formations, and how to find our way back to where we'd started.

We spent our last night in South Dakota at the Pinnacles Overlook. From the railing, far out in the convoluted landscape, I could pick out the gully we'd followed, the mesa top where we first got close to a buffalo. That green tree we sheltered beneath, next to a sun-bleached skull.

IT ALL LOOKED SO DIFFERENT FROM HERE. THE LAND spoke in a way it hadn't before. I harboured a special feeling for it now.

I slid a bottle of beer from the case in the back of the truck and climbed over the railing to edge out along a crumbly ridge. I sat alone on a projecting finger, suspended over the void. As the sun went down, the landscape changed. The shadows altered the depths and flats, putting on one final show for me.

The true nature of South Dakota is hidden. Its Black Hills abound in sacred places visible only to the Lakota. The Badlands reveal the passage of eons to the naked eyes of a geologist. The historian sees layers of civilization, from Indian to settler to tourist. The modern Cold War history of South Dakota lies hidden too in hundreds of Minuteman missile silos, one of which is open to the public, concealed by the peaceful prairie sod.

The story of South Dakota isn't linear. That hidden past was all around, ghosted like multiple exposures layer upon layer in a distortion of temporal space and distance. The past and the present exist simultaneously and, standing on the windblown overlook, I was just a memory of my future selves, ghosted on the fractured screen of this Dakota view. 🌐

**Ryan Murdock** is an Ottawa-based writer and editor of *CST Magazine*. He has a keen interest in marginal regions, nomadic peoples and places where cultures meet and sometimes clash.

**Jason George** is a Toronto-based photographer whose professional work can be viewed at [www.jasongeorge.com](http://www.jasongeorge.com)

# OUTPOSTINGS SOUTH DAKOTA

## WHAT TO SEE

**The Black Hills.** "Rising like an island from a sea of rolling hills... stretching for a hundred miles between the Belle Fourche River in the north and the Cheyenne to the south, and varying in width from forty to sixty miles. [The] *Paha Sapa*... are actually mountains... the highest, Harney Peak, rises 7242 feet."—*The Rough Guide to USA*; [www.roughguides.com](http://www.roughguides.com)

**Badlands National Park:** Accessible from I-90 at exits 31 (northeast entrance) and 109-110 (the Wall exit), the Park encompasses the most thrilling sections of the Badlands and may be hiked anywhere. The Door Trail is unforgettable, beginning at a natural rock doorway and continuing in a loop through spectacular scenery, particularly at dawn and dusk when the rock colours are at their most vivid. The Ben Reifel Visitor Center five miles from the northeast entrance charges \$10 per vehicle for a seven-day pass.

tel: (605) 433-5361; [www.nps.gov/badl](http://www.nps.gov/badl)

**Crazy Horse Memorial:** Located five miles north of Custer on US-16, the monument is open from dusk to dawn, year-round. Admission is free to Native Americans and \$9 for other visitors. The main viewing area is located one mile from the enormous sculpture, which is scheduled to be completed in 2055. Only big-time contributors to the privately funded project get to visit the construction site itself. tel: (605) 673-4781; [www.crazyhorsememorial.org](http://www.crazyhorsememorial.org)

**Minuteman Missile National Historic Site:** Located near the Badlands next to I-90 at Exit 131, MMNHS preserves a Launch Control Facility and a missile silo complex. Free two-hour tours are offered at 10 a.m. throughout the fall, winter and spring, and are limited to six people. tel: (605) 433-5552; [www.nps.gov/mimi](http://www.nps.gov/mimi)



## GETTING AROUND

**Outfitters:** If you want to experience some of the most extreme and remote areas of South Dakota, Dakota Adventures is your company. The proprietor, outdoor expert Caleb Gilkerson, has been featured on ESPN Outdoors and The Outdoor Channel, and in print media.

**Services:** Specializes in canoe and kayak trips on the Missouri, Cheyenne, and White Rivers, and in backpacking trips into the Badlands. Also offers customized excursions.

**Costs:** Costs for inclusive packages range from \$285 for a two-day paddle excursion to

\$610 for a remote six-day Cheyenne River trip. A three-day backpacking excursion to the Badlands will run approximately \$360. All gear and meals included.

**Contact: Dakota Adventures,** 511 W. Dakota, Pierre, SD 57501; tel: (605) 224-6572; (toll free) 1-800-239-9380; (email) [paddle@adventuresd.com](mailto:paddle@adventuresd.com); [www.adventuresd.com](http://www.adventuresd.com)

**South Dakota Tourism**  
(toll free) 1-800-952-3625  
[www.travelsd.com](http://www.travelsd.com)

## WHEN TO GO

May and June are the best months for paddling, as trips and distances depend on water volume. Spring, fall and even winter are ideal for Badlands hiking, but mid-June to mid-September are best avoided due to extreme heat. Be warned that extremes of weather are the norm in South Dakota at all times. It is not unusual to see rain, snow, sun and extreme winds all in the same afternoon. Pack accordingly. If you venture into the Badlands without a guide, topographical maps are utterly essential.

**Key Directions:** For access to the Badlands and the Black Hills, fly into Rapid City, SD. For river trips, the best access point is the capital city of Pierre, SD.

PHOTO: JASON GEORGE; MAP: STEVE WILSON

Sealed in a steel tube deep under the prairie, two men held the keys that could unleash nuclear annihilation. Visit MMNHS to relive the Cold War, and to find out just how close we came...

