



South Dakota's Photographic Jewels

Aged to Perfection



By Sandy Zelasko

With the fast approaching 82nd Annual PSA Photo Festival scheduled in Rapid City, South Dakota, it would be helpful to point out the abundance of captivating photo-worthy treasures the state has to offer. Often described as the Mount Rushmore State, creative possibilities are endless. From vast sunflower fields and historic grain elevators to the stone busts of past U.S. presidents, South Dakota offers its charm to any photographer willing to take the journey.

But you wouldn't be the first to capture the beauty of South Dakota life. Frontier photographer, William J. Collins, proprietor of a portrait studio in Rapid City, worked magic with glass plate photography at the turn of the 20th century. He created thousands of representations

from all over the Black Hills, a region well-known today for its tourism and recreation.

The isolated mountain range, rising from the Great Plains in western South Dakota, lives up to its reputation, unveiling grand landscapes of regal towering spires, peaceful ponderosa pine forests, exploratory cave complexes and abundant wildlife for the observant visitor.

For the adventurous photographer, there is **Jewel Cave National Monument** and **Wind Cave National Park**, two of the largest cave systems in the world. Above ground, the grasslands make up the largest remaining natural mixed-grass prairie in the United States. It is home to pronghorn, elk, coyote, badger, bobcat, fox and prairie dog just to name a few of the many wildlife species in the area.

“Believe in the power of a landscape. Now live the beauty of South Dakota.”

The **Needle's District** and **Sylvan Lake** are delightful locations for stunning landscapes and reflection photography. The **Needle's Eye** is a must-stop on the loop road. Hope for blue or dramatic skies which make for compelling images with the Needle as your main subject.

Spearfish Canyon Scenic Byway is a "must-take highway." Spending any day of the year in this 19-mile gorge will not disappoint. **Bridal Veil Falls**, in full view from the highway, cascades a hundred feet to join Spearfish Creek along the canyon floor. Wandering the trails at **Roughlock Falls Nature Area** is a delight for intimate landscape photographers and a good location for slowing shutter speeds, while capturing tumbling waterfalls and fall color. If you are there early enough, keep an eye out for deer, bighorn and mountain lions who roam the canyon year-round.

Custer State Park is the largest and first in the South Dakota state park system and doubles as a wildlife reserve. Named after Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer, the park is approximately 71,000 acres of varied terrain including rolling prairie grasslands and rugged mountains. It is a wildlife photographer's paradise with elk, coyote,

white tailed and mule deer, mountain goat, bighorn sheep and the ever-friendly feral burros who will, if you aren't paying attention, stick their head into your open car window in search of a treat. Best time to see wildlife is early morning and late afternoon, although it is possible to photograph raptors, prairie dogs, bison and the ever-so-cute least chipmunk at play any time of day.

The fascinating history of **Mount Rushmore National Memorial** is beyond this article but the monument itself is a photo destination everyone should see. South Dakota claims to have invented the "selfie." In 1963, using the new lightweight Instamatic camera, it was possible for Rushmore visitors to easily photograph themselves as the "fifth head" on the memorial. Nowadays a smartphone does the trick.

Looking for a night sky destination? You can't go wrong at **Badlands National Park**, just an hour east of Rapid City. The park has so much to offer within its three units managed by the National Park Service in cooperation with the Oglala Sioux Tribe. "The Wall" is the primary feature in the North Unit. Separating prairie grasslands to the north and south, the Wall's rock formations are eroding one inch



Meadowlark Stretch



Eat More Flowers

per year and can be photographed at many pullouts throughout park boundaries.

Begin photographing at civil twilight for a chance at stunning landscapes and the opportunity to see a variety of wildlife who call the park their home. Multi-color sediments tell stories of an ancient sea and balanced boulders sit on pedestals of stone; silent fortresses for captivating silhouettes. Shoot well into nautical twilight for colorful and impressive imagery especially at the southeast end of the park near **Norbeck Pass**.

Sage Creek Rim Road leads you through American bison landscape, enormous prairie dog

towns and beyond, where meadowlarks rest to stretch their wings. Continue beyond to the ghost town of **Scenic** with your choice of crumbling jail cells, Tatanka mural and skull adorned abandoned establishment. The **Stronghold Unit** of Badlands National Park is where spectacular views from on top of **Sheep Table Mountain** can be found (4WD may be required). Out-of-the-way **Red Shirt Table Overlook** is a must for the photographer chasing glorious sunrise images. Come prepared with a split neutral density filter or use the High Dynamic Range function in your camera at this spectacular overlook.



Needle's Spires

Back to civilization, the famous **Wall Drug** in Wall, SD, has everything a person would need (except camera gear of course). In its heyday, 3,000 billboard signs across the state advertised “FREE ICE WATER, ICE CREAM and 5 CENT COFFEE” to entice travelers to stop and shop.

The town of Wall itself has lots of photographic prospects. Graffiti-laden train cars, shiny new grain towers, historically incorrect mannequins, roadside attractions and the best darn **Hole in the Wall Book Store** in South Dakota.

Photos © Sandy Zelasko

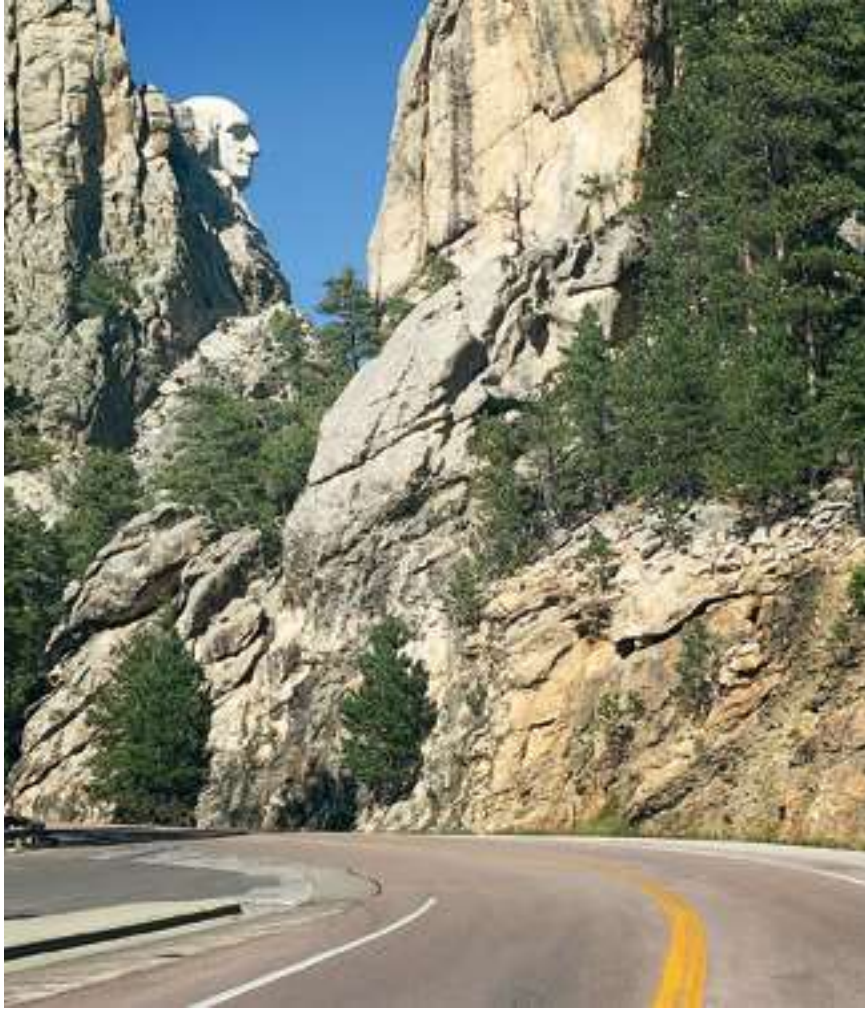
If you're not up to traveling for a day, Rapid



Nailed It



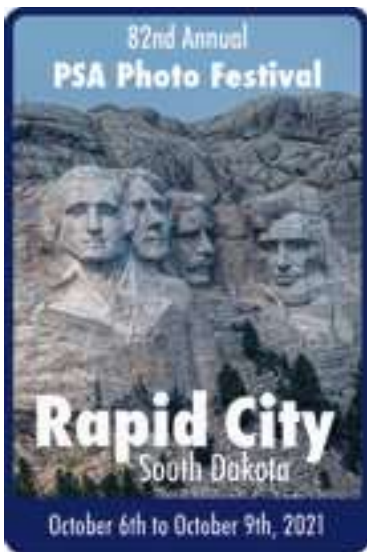
Timberland Dweller



George

City has many attractions for the meandering photographer. **Reptile Gardens** is more of a fun place to see rather than a photo destination, however there are some possibilities for colorful images of the resident wildlife. **Dinosaur Park** may attract the eclectic photographer. Finding creative and/or composite material of dinosaur statues is a good bet here. **Skyline Wilderness Area Park** affords great views of the town itself and could be a night sky possibility or early morning wildlife adventure. Take a stroll downtown for **The City of Presidents Walk**. Pick up a map for this self-guided tour of bronze statues of past presidents. Found on street corners around town, unique images can be made here. And if you do only one thing in town, take a walk-through **Art Alley**, where graffiti comes alive and will leave you with a new appreciation for the imaginative art form.

With a vehicle, you can travel even further to other attractions within a day's drive of Rapid City. **1880 Town** is an old movie set where many props and costume rentals are available. It boasts a few remaining artifacts from the movie *Dances with Wolves*, a gift shop, a 50's train diner and convenience store. **Bear Country USA**, a short drive from town, is a unique drive-through wildlife park which allows



Wall Grain



Wall After a Rain

you to photograph bear, elk, wolves and other North American animals. And **Crazy Horse Memorial**, the world's largest mountain carving in progress offers a cultural experience you won't find anywhere else.

So, plan an extended visit and take in all the sights. There is much more than first meets the eye in the sunshine state of South Dakota. ■

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Sandy Zelasko is an award-winning and published nature photographer presently working in the field of conservation photography. She leads many workshops including South Dakota. In this article, Sandy shares with us a number of photogenic spots near Rapid City. She will be leading a Festival pre-trip October 3-4. Learn more about Sandy at her website, www.SandraLeePhotography.com.



Sunflower Fields



On Alert