

Black Hills, South Dakota, June 2017

Greetings! We just returned from a five day rock climbing trip in the Black Hills of South Dakota- here's our trip report.

Day 0

We decided to split the 14 hour drive into two portions and spent the first day driving only 9.5 hours to Palisades State Park in Eastern South Dakota, where the Split Rock Creek breaks through a band of pink quartzite rock. There is climbing, but we arrived late in the day and just wandered around and looked at the formations.



Day 1

We arrived around midday in the touristy town of Keystone, drove up past Mt. Rushmore, saw the presidents from the road, and headed for the climbing area South Seas a few minutes up the road from the monument entrance. We had chosen this area because the routes are sports routes well protected with bolts. We parked at the Wrinkled Rock parking area, which also has primitive climber camping, packed our backpacks, and headed towards the rocks. We didn't get far until we encountered the first crag with

a short route in our difficulty range and started climbing.

It took us a while to get used to the new rock: wonderful solid granite with marvelous friction and quartz crystals jutting out that were solid enough to use as hand and foot holds. After the first route, we went over to the main formations of the area and climbed two long routes Thomas had on his list of best routes: Shark's Breath, 5.7, and Classic Waves, 5.8 (photo at right).

We drove to Custer State Park, where we had reserved camping at Center Lake, and pitched tent. All South Dakota State Parks require campers to make a reservation, but the campground reservation system is very convenient and can be accessed online or 24/7 by phone.



Day 2



The next day we headed back to Mt. Rushmore Monument and went to the Magna Carta area, again an area with sports climbs. We started with a fun looking arête on Solo System, 5.6, which seemed a bit harder than it's rating suggested. The long 5.8 on nearby Pointy Little Devil was sustained friction climbing which we found quite challenging compared to, and very different from, the routes of the previous day.

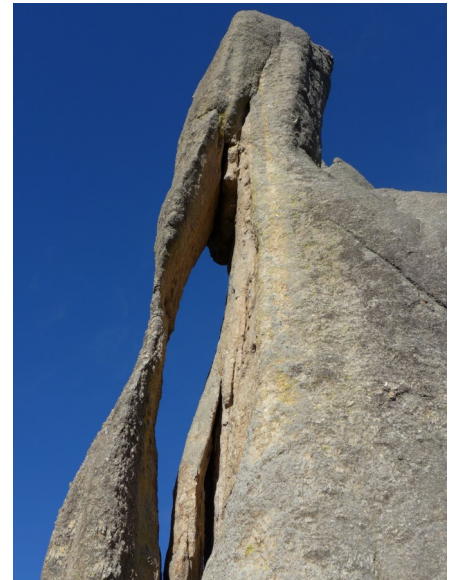
A word about climbing pictures: it takes two people to climb, because the climber needs another person to belay, that is secure and give out the rope in a controlled way so it will hold the climber during a fall. This means that actual climbing pictures are limited to the moments when the climber's situation is not too precarious, so that the belaying partner can divert some of his or her attention (and one hand) to the camera. So, sorry folks—the toughest moves cannot be documented photographically without a designated photographer.

But even so, some impressive pictures are possible. One of our most memorable routes lead us up the knife like arête of Gossamer, 5.7, on the aptly named Picture Window rock:



Day 3

We got up early and drove up Needles Highway to Sylvan Lake which has a large concentration of bolted sports routes. Most of the other climbing in the state park are trad routes which require climbers to place their own gear for protection. Needles Highway boasts wonderful views of bizarre rock formations, the most famous one being the Needle's Eye (right). It also has several low and narrow tunnels. And it is a main tourist attraction. So, the key is to get up the highway and through the tunnels before crowds gather and cars line up in front of the tunnels, trying to pass in either direction.

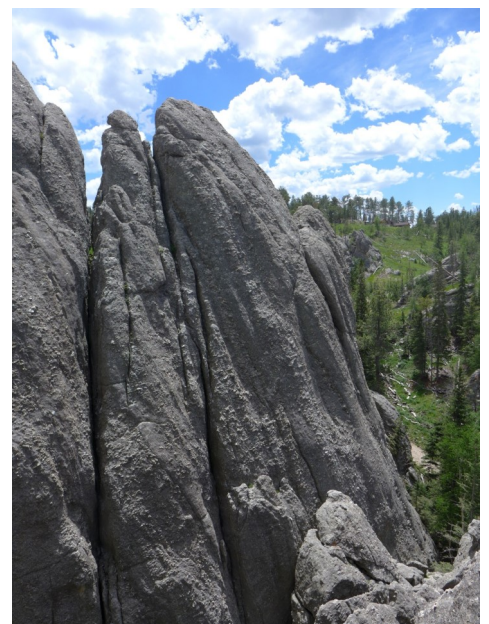


Mornings are also a good time to see wildlife near the road.



Sylvan Lake is a beautiful mountain lake where granite rocks form an almost complete natural dam. It is an extremely popular area for hikers, climbers, swimmers, and boaters.

We started climbing right behind the dam with a first route and then climbed the entire day, including several long routes, one of which on Inner Outlet (at right) even required two ropes to rappel.



Some time in the afternoon, we found a rock face that looked inviting and had some bolts, looked about the right difficulty, and so we climbed on Rhinoceros a route that we later discovered to be Hairy Horn, 5.7. Great view from the belay station in the window below the summit block.



That was supposed to be the last climb for the day. We had already packed up and were ready to leave, but walked around looking at more routes, and the Riddle Route just looked too good! So we unpacked again and roped up, and ended a long climbing day with a nice, but quite sparsely protected 5.6. Below, Thomas rappelling down from Riddle (In the pic at right, it's the rock to the

right of the green gap in the middle between the formations)



We avoided the narrow tunnels on the popular Needles Highway on our afternoon return and drove to the campground via Custer, a quiet little town with several restaurants and a supermarket, the ideal opportunity to eat and restock on food.



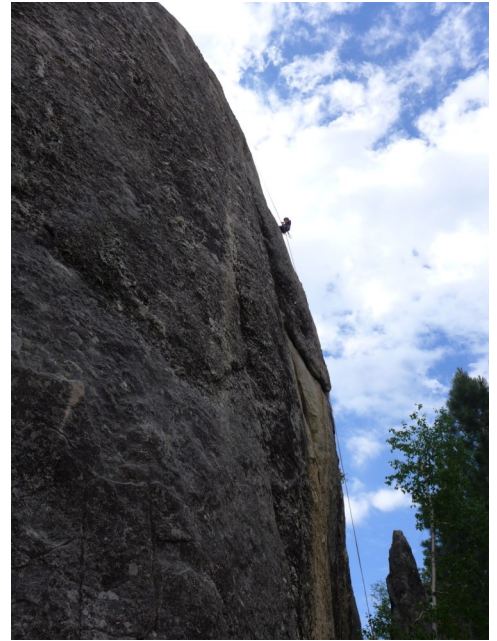
At right: Sylvan Lake in late afternoon

Day 4

We returned to South Seas with a special agenda: to climb the 155 ft long Second Hand Rose Arête, 5.6 on Hornet's Nest and Solitaire, 5.7, on Borneo. Great fun route, but the crux at the last bolt is significantly harder than any other move on the route.

We climbed a few more shorter routes, but after four days of climbing, we could feel it and stopped at mid afternoon to have time to drive the scenic Wildlife Loop.

Custer State Park is home to a 1,400 head buffalo herd. On the drive, we could see buffalo, pronghorn (sometimes called antelope), deer, and prairie dogs.



Day 5

This day was supposed to be a rest day: we were hiking to Black Elk Peak, formerly Harney Peak, at 7,244ft the highest point East of the Rocky Mountains. We started at Sylvan Lake and hiked first towards Little Devil's Tower trailhead to do detour to look closer at the beautiful Cathedral Spires.



Harney Peak is a very popular destination. Most hikers come up directly from Sylvan Lake, the route we chose for our descent.

We were down at the lake at 1:30pm, after a seven mile hike. Too early to quit, even for a “rest day”—so we unpacked the climbing gear and climbed another two beautiful routes, Evarete and the Chockstone Pinnacle on Rhinoceros Rock. The latter would be a worthy last climb for this trip.



On the way to the peak, we saw lots of rocks not described in our guidebook. So much climbing!



Day 6

The rest day hadn't exactly been a rest day, and we were pretty tired after five days of climbing. Also, the morning was grey and chilly and not exactly inviting to go climbing, so Thomas suggested a visit to Wind Cave National Park, which is directly South of Custer State Park. And upon arrival in the visitor center, we found out that they do a wild cave tour and that there were still open spots—so we signed up for a four hour caving tour at 1pm. That left us time to head into the small town of Hotsprings to acquire a simple sweater I could wear in the cave, so I would not have to ruin my favorite fleece sweater (excellent decision, as it turned out) and get some leisurely breakfast in a café. The quality of our camping breakfast had been greatly improved by the acquisition of an outdoor French press.; finally, we can have real coffee and not the awful instant stuff. But still, some fresh bagels and cappuccino was a nice treat. And we still had time for a walk through Wind Cave Canyon.

At 12:30pm, we gathered at the visitor center, were instructed and handed helmets, knee pads, gloves, and three sources of light. We were a group of eight (the other participants were a family from Kansas City), guided by a young energetic knowledgeable ranger named Kim. For three hours, we crawled through passages underground, the smallest opening being 10 inches tall, and explored the cave away from paved and lighted walking paths. Great fun, and nobody got stuck.

On the way back to our campground, we saw several prairie dog towns and managed to photograph one who was not too shy. (Note to self: next time, bring the SLR camera with telephoto lens for wildlife photography.)

It felt like a good end to our stay in the Black Hills.



Day 7

On the drive back, we drove through Badlands National park. Fascinating desolate landscape, with lots of wild-life” bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and hundreds of prairie dogs.

