

DAY TRIP SOUTH DAKOTA

Touch of Old West

Dinosaur legends and stony-faced presidents are just the beginning, writes *Kristie Kellahan*.

RAPID City, South Dakota proudly calls itself the City of Presidents. It's the gateway to Mount Rushmore National Memorial's colossal granite sculptures of four United States presidents, and home to 43 life-size bronze presidential statues on street corners throughout downtown.

I wait out the front of historic Alex Johnson Hotel to meet Carrie Gerlach, a local tour guide who will be showing me around the region for the next six hours. I've had no time to research or plan, so I ask Gerlach to show me some of her favourite places. The founder and chief exploration officer of Black Hills Adventure Tours rises to the challenge, planning a fantastic day's itinerary on the spot.

Let's go! We jump into her Ford F-150 pickup truck and make tracks to Badlands National Park. First stop on the road out of town: Scenic, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it ghost town. It once had two saloons (a sign on the crumbling facade of one says, "Indians Allowed"), a grocery store, a high school, a bank and a rudimentary jail for rowdy cowboys.

Today, you could roll a haystack down the main road and not hit anyone or anything. In 2011, for reasons unknown, the entire town was purchased by a Philippines-based church for \$US799,000.

Back in the car, Gerlach shares her vast knowledge of the National Park. As we drive by prairie fields, a hawk takes flight, clutching an indignant rattlesnake in its beak. Prairie dogs poke their heads up to look around, curious as a town gossip.

The indigenous Lakota people gave the



region its ominous name - "bad lands" - because of its extreme temperatures, aridity and rocky terrain. Those challenging geological conditions make the park a prime resting place for fossils of all kinds. Average age of the fossils found - ancient camels, alligators, saber-toothed cats and rhinoceros - is more than 30 million years, many in excellent condition. Paleontologists are drawn to South Dakota for its epic finds, including the most complete and largest T-Rex fossil ever found. Her name is Sue and she now lives at the Chicago Field Museum.

To my eyes at least, Badlands resembles a moonscape, with its rugged canyons and rock formations. With more time to spare, I'd love to see the way the light changes the landscape at sunrise and sunset.

No road trip to South Dakota would be complete without a spin along scenic Needles Highway, our next destination. The winding roads and hairpin turns are not for the nervous driver, however the effort is rewarded with spectacular views of pine forests, granite formations and meadows blanketed in wildflowers. We spot Mount Rushmore in the distance, framed perfectly by the contours of the rocky tunnel we're driving through. So much adventure in one day, and there's still one stop to make. The Journey Museum's remit is broad: Black Hills history, Native American culture, dinosaurs, early settlement and humanity's journey through time. So broad, I promise to return another day for a second look. blackhillsadventuretours.com

The writer travelled with assistance from greatamericanwest.com.au