



Backpacking in Badlands National Park



*Nineteenth-century French trappers who christened this area **mauvaises terres a traverser** (bad lands to travel across) might regard the backcountry hiker of today with bewilderment. The spires, pinnacles, and ravines which frustrated earlier travelers provide a visual “gateway to forever” with views that can stretch over fifty miles and offer solitude and serenity. While in Badlands National Park, answer the call for those who seek to understand, firsthand, the dynamics of nature in this forbidding-looking place.*

Accessing Badland's Best

The park has no formal system of backcountry permits or reservations, but we urge all backpackers to stop at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center. Rangers on duty can help you plan on enjoyable and successful trip, offering assistance with directions, safety tips, maps, and information sheets.

Backpackers may camp anywhere in the park that is at least one-half mile from any road or trail and not visible from park roads. Because only the Castle Trail strays far from the main road, most backpackers set out cross country on routes of their own. In this case, topographic maps are strongly recommended, if not essential. In the North Unit, the 64,144 acre Badlands Wilderness is ideal for backpackers. Leave your car at the primitive campground or Sage Creek Basin Overlook and follow Sage Creek into the wilderness.

Weather or Not

What are the best times to experience the Badlands backcountry? Perhaps spring and fall, when days are pleasant and nights are cool. The months of May and June are often rainy, although storms are possible year round. Always carry rain gear and extra clothing. Fall is generally cool and clear, but don't be caught unprepared for an early blizzard.

In summer, temperatures exceeding 100 degrees F can pose serious health hazards. Avoid heat sickness by drinking water (at least one gallon or more a day) and staying out of the midday sun. Be alert for symptoms of heat exhaustion or stroke: cramps (especially in legs and abdomen), weakness, nausea, and dizziness. Serious cases require immediate medical attention. Hot summer weather is often interrupted by severe thunderstorms, complete with large hail and lightning. If caught in a sudden storm, look for shelter from high winds. Avoid ridges, exposed areas, and isolated trees where lightening may strike.

Only the most prepared hikers attempt backpacking trips in the winter. Weather is unpredictable at best. Although days can be sunny with temperatures comfortably above 30 degrees F, sudden blizzards can send the mercury plunging below zero. Combined with strong winds, severe winter temperatures make backcountry survival difficult for those unprepared. Air temperatures at -40 are not uncommon. Hyperthermia (chilling of the body's core) is a very real threat. Staying warm, dry and out of the wind is the best way to prevent problems. Winter backpackers should speak with a ranger at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center before setting out.

Leave No Trace

Please share our commitment to preserving the backcountry for others to enjoy by practicing the principles of Leave No Trace. NO FIRES. Fire danger in the Badlands remains high year round. As a result, we require us of backpacking stoves at all times.

Plan Ahead and Prepare. There is very little water to be found in the White River Badlands. All water found in our backcountry is naturally contaminated with dissolved minerals and very fine sediment. Boiling water, treating it with chemicals, or using filters does not make it fit to drink. Consequently, no water in the Badlands is potable. An adequate supply must be packed in. Carry at least one gallon per person per day.

Respect Wildlife. It is against the law to disturb animals in all national parks. Doing so can endanger both you and the wildlife. When hiking in the Sage Creek area, be alert for bison, which may charge if approached. Bison gorings can kill. If you pitch your tent on or near the bison trails crisscrossing the wilderness area, you may have some unwelcome visitors in the middle of the night. Watch for snakes. Although only one species of snake in the park (the prairie rattlesnake) is poisonous, all may bite if sufficiently disturbed. Snake bites are seldom fatal; however, they are extremely painful and can quickly become infected.

Dispose of Waste Properly. Carry all refuse out of the backcountry. Do not bury your trash. Although Badlands has no bears or similar large animals that are a concern in many other western parks, be aware that our rodents, coyotes, and other scavenging critters may be drawn to your camp if you are not a clean camper. Bury human waste six to eight inches below of the surface and a minimum of 200 feet from any water sources. Cover well with soil. Waste water should be disposed of at least 200 feet from water sources, as well.

Leave What You Find. Rocks, fossils, plants, and artifacts belong to every visitor. Leave them in their place and report your find to a park ranger at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center or White River Visitor Center.

For Your Safety

Badlands National Park is not known as a climber's paradise for very good reasons. The soft sediment that remain as the Badlands Wall are extremely crumbly. Our landscape changes on a daily basis. Do not attempt climbing on the formations because they can suddenly give way.

Because few people use the Badlands backcountry, help may not be close at hand for those who experience problems. Let friends or relatives know when you depart and when you expect to return. As cell phones become more common, we are finding an increase in the number of backcountry travelers who have telephone access in case of an emergency. If you are such a hiker, be aware that you may experience difficulty using your phone because of our topography and remote location. In case of emergency, dial 911 or (605) 433-5361.

A Matter of Perspective

What are the White River Badlands? Today, we explore the Badlands as a wild place and a study it as a paleontological text book. Take this opportunity as you explore our backcountry to join those who came before in their respect for the fierceness of the Badlands. Be temporarily blinded by its beauty. Insure that every backcountry explorer has the same sense of discover that you have experienced. Travel lightly and travel well.