



MILLIONS OF YEARS LATER, the Badlands of South Dakota remains lustrous and barren. With the arrival of man, this jagged terrain became the province of tribes: mammoth hunters and nomads following bison across the plains. In the 18th century, the Oglala and Lakota established this as their spiritual home. *Mako sica*, they called it—bad lands. ¶ It is harsh country, but beautiful: an arid sea, filled with fossils of ancient fish and reptiles, under an endless slate of sky. Here, too, are the bones of tribal elders and ghost dancers. Since the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, the Badlands has become a sacred burial site for the Lakota. And this, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation—the poorest community in the United States—is at its heart.

SKYANDBONES

ONCE, THIS PLACE WAS A WARM, SHALLOW SEA. THEN CAME WAVES OF GLACIERS AND CEASELESS WINDS, LEAVING LANDFORMS CARVED OUT OF ROCKY EARTH, DENSE WITH THE SKELETONS OF PREHISTORIC CREATURES.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUG BEASLEY | TEXT BY ANN M. BAUER

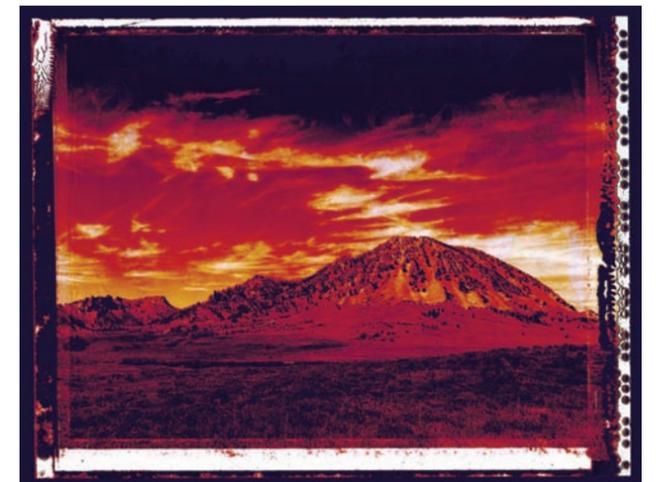


THE BADLANDS lies within an hour's drive of cities that are paved, wired, thoroughly modern. And there is a symbolic civilization here: the National Park Service has claimed 244,000 acres, erecting buildings and routing trails through the buttes and valleys. Narrow roads twist through the expanse of rock and air. There are restaurants serving native meats, shops selling tchotchkes, fleets of wooden cabins and inexpensive motels, and remote satellite towers. But these are insignificant. Turn your head and they disappear. Instead, wind-worn spires rise in variegated layers of stone: rose, lavender, plum, indigo, mossy green, dusk, and gold. Prairie grasses grow in the crevices, as do wildflowers that are impervious to the hard summer sun. Visit the Badlands and you will know what it means to be alone on a dusty moonscape, shadowed by clouds—a speck of humanity on the face of a foreign world.





EVEN THE TREES eventually fossilize, becoming calcified outlines of their former selves, strong and tall even in death. Storms advance in walls across the bowing prairie grass. The horizon is visible all the way to its curved end. Yet everything here seems to reach upward, as if rising toward the endless space above. Then sunset arrives, a spectacular canvas of fire, filling the great bowl of sky with textures and hues seen nowhere else on Earth. At Bear Butte (below right), the transition from day to night is transcendent. This is the Mount Sinai of the Cheyenne nation—the place where, 4,000 years ago, the revered leader Sweet Medicine is said to have received spiritual guidance. Even today, it is the site where all tribes of the Sioux people come together to meditate and pray.





THERE ARE no movie houses or public libraries here—only the theater of changing seasons, the life cycles of animals, the annual surge of visitors who leave a welcome silence in their wake each fall. Winters are brutal: silver air that swings like a blade. Yet people live here year-round; they call this place home. Interior, South Dakota—population 78, give or take a soul or two—is the oldest town in the region. Once a regular stop on the rodeo circuit, it has burned down and been rebuilt twice. Situated between Pine Ridge and the headquarters for Badlands National Park, Interior has the only grocery store for miles around. There is a café that serves Angus stew and Indian tacos, a Budget Host Motel where locals gather, a two-man jail slightly larger than an outhouse. The sky shifts and sunlight breaks through. Winds move like the tides. The earth is still, and the bones remain. **MM**

