

South Dakota More Than Buffalo and Badlands

By James Thompson

Most international filmmakers don't often consider trekking all the way to South Dakota to shoot. Well, after reading this special spotlight on this breathtaking state, perhaps they will. Mild weather, inexpensive accommodations, a steam train, one-of-a-kind landscapes that are easy to get to, and talented and motivated crews, as well as experienced wranglers and thousands of "Lakota Natives" available as extras – are all reasons to consider taking a project to South Dakota.

South Dakota should be considered for its picturesque locations. It is, in fact, a land of geographic variety, open spaces, mountainous terrain, unique landscapes and some interesting urban centers. In the east, you'll find South Dakota's largest city, Sioux Falls, with a population of around 130,000. Sioux Falls is surrounded by farmland, including corn, soybean, wheat and al-

falfa fields, and thousands of acres of open prairie. In the east, travelers will find a very strong and important history, from the restored Fort Sisseton National Historic Site in the northeast to the Lewis and Clark trail in the southeast.

In the west, there are two national grasslands, completely undisturbed and true to their original beauty. There are also the Badlands, which are a rugged 244,000 acres of spectacular and unique landscapes that look like, and can be shot as, the moon or a dried-up ocean bottom. On the far western end of South Dakota is the Black Hills National Forest. It's where you'll find the mountain sculptures of Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse, towering granite spires along Needles Highway, the Old West history of Deadwood, and one of the largest publicly owned buffalo herds in Custer State Park.

All of this is split right down the middle by the Missouri River and South Dakota's "Great Lakes,"

which were created after the building of four dams along the river.

The NBC reality show, "Treasure Hunters" (magical Elves Production Company) went to South Dakota to film Mount Rushmore. The show sent contestants traveling around the world searching for historic clues that revealed some of the history of the country. At the same time they were given clues to their next location. While they brought in the main crew, they hired several local crewmembers to fill many other positions, including the production assistants and drivers. "The people down there were just amazing, really helpful [and] really film-friendly," said producer, Russell Gremillot.

Location manager, Richard Klotz is currently scouting South Dakota for a Disney film that he was not at liberty to discuss. However, he was more than willing to share his experiences on a major film he did for Disney/Touchstone almost

10 years ago.

According to Klotz, the futuristic feature "Armageddon" ended up in South Dakota because of the unique look of the Badlands National Park, which played as an asteroid. They also used a private ranch to build a crashed spaceship set. "It was a beautiful state with a great diversity of looks," said Klotz. "It was a great experience."

South Dakota is no stranger to filming. Orion filmed the blockbuster feature film, "Dances With Wolves," throughout the state in 1989, starting a filming trend. Other features that followed, included "Head of State" (DreamWorks, 2002), "Hidalgo" (Disney, 2002), "Mercury Rising" (Universal Pictures, 1997), and "Wyatt Earp" (Warner Bros., 1993).

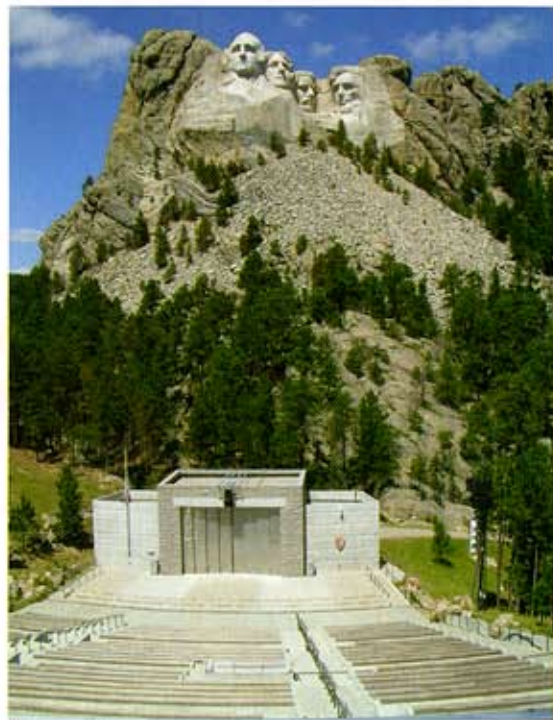
In the last year, Sean Penn filmed "Into the Wild," for Paramount Pictures, Great Britain's Roaring Fire Films shot "Rez Bomb," and the BBC did a documentary entitled "Custer's Plan" in South Dakota.

Recently, "The Stone Child," a coming of age drama about an 11-year-old boy who develops by coming to terms with the divorce of his Mormon mother and Lakota father, filmed in South Dakota. During the writing of the script director, Chris Martini went to South Dakota to do extensive research for his film. He ended up spend-

ing time on the Pine Ridge Reservation where he was able to gain insight, and made some important contacts. "I started to adapt the story specifically to the Lakota culture," said Martini. "At the same time, I was captivated by the beauty of the landscape. Because of the cultural element, it would have been a betrayal to the people to film it elsewhere."

Martini said that they were on a tight budget and ended up shooting the film on Super 16mm. Their limited budget also created crew concerns. They ended up bringing in DOP John Rotan and first AC David Short from North Carolina. However, they found their sound mixer in South Dakota. They used Rick Van Ness and his boom operator, Chris Roth "...who proved valuable assets to our production," said Martini.

Martini shot a short seven-minute version over two days in an attempt to drum up some more money for the feature. While filming was difficult, they ended up with some great footage. "My advice to producers coming



"Treasure Hunters" shot in Mt. Rushmore. Photo Provided by Russell Gremillot

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into the state to film is to keep in mind the long distances when scheduling and budgeting. Everything is really spread out in South Dakota," said Martini. "I wish there were more resources in South Dakota, but the crew went above and beyond what was expected. The location owners were great and very tolerant of us. If you can find the right people, South Dakota is a great place to film, but I would recommend bringing in some of your key players and crewmembers."

Over the years, South Dakota has developed a small but very professional crew base. Jim Hatzell from Fiddler's Green Studio is one such crewmember, having been able to make a living working on different productions in different capacities. Fiddler's Green Studio is a western art and photography showcase that has helped Hatzell bring attention to his strong history background. Hatzell, who also worked as a location manager on "The Stone Child," recently found himself scouting for the BBC's "Little Big Horn."

"They were thinking they had to film it over in Montana. I gave them a four-hour tour of the actual Little Big Horn Battlefield and I said 'OK, now where are you going to film?' The park wouldn't let them film on their property," said Hatzell. "I took them out to South Dakota and showed them this ranch and it was identical to the Little Big Horn." The ranch they chose was located on the Cheyenne River (the longest river in North America that flows north). The producers found affordable housing in Wall, SD, just 10 minutes away from the base camp.



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According to Wanda Romkema, Media and PR Manager for the South Dakota Office of Tourism, South Dakota crews are growing. "We have a fairly comprehensive database of crew and service listings on our website, and more are being added regularly," says Romkema. "We also have a large crew of experienced IATSE people that can perform a large amount of crew jobs from construction to electrics, props and wardrobe."

South Dakota has a variety of video and lighting equipment available, a new grip truck and now a steam train. "Most of our support services come from either Sioux Falls, Aberdeen (in the east) or the Rapid City area (in the west) areas. These cities offer services for camera, grip, actors, craft services, etc.," said Romkema. Other equipment and services are often brought in from Denver, Minneapolis or Chicago.

The Stone Child rented their 16mm camera package and lights from Cinequipt in Minneapolis. "Chris Beales was the rep out there, and I have to say that Cinequipt is one of the best rental houses I have dealt with," said Martini. "We hired a first AC in Minneapolis to prep the equipment, the shipping costs were minimal, and the equipment arrived on time in Rapid City."

While there are no large studios available in South Dakota, most production companies find

empty facilities to build interior sets and/or cover sets. When the film "Head of State" filmed in South Dakota, they needed a facility in which to build a very large set. "We built it in the gymnasium of an abandoned middle school and then transported it to Mount Rushmore," said Romkema. "The year before we filmed an Indian camp inside a building at the fairgrounds. We can get buildings much cheaper here than most other areas."

South Dakota also offers producers a few tax incentives. For lodging, any room rented for 28 consecutive days is exempt from the state, city and tourism sales taxes. Also – on productions made wholly or partially in South Dakota, with project costs exceeding \$250,000 in taxable costs incurred in South Dakota – 100 percent of the South Dakota contractor's excise tax and 100 percent of the South Dakota sales and use tax may be refunded. More info on tax incentives can be found on their website, at <http://www.filmsd.com/filming>.

"The Stone Child's" director was asked to sum up his experience of filming in South Dakota in his own words. Martini responded, "Despite the lack of some key crew and necessary equipment, South Dakota is a great place to film. The people are great – so helpful – and the state really goes all the way with helping to publicize your film.

And the locations are unlike anywhere in the world. It's a beautiful, quiet, calm place to film. A great place to focus on your story and not have to deal with any outside obstacles while filming. And the people truly understand what you are going for. People there are so excited by the fact that a movie is being filmed there that you will get more than you asked for. Dawn and 'magic hour' are so beautiful in South Dakota."

Lastly, Romkema was asked to sum up in her own words why producers should consider bringing a production to South Dakota. "South Dakota has a very passionate filming industry that is willing to assist in any way possible. The industry here is well seasoned with experience in everything from feature films to commercials to documentaries and everything in between. The people are friendly, easy to work with and extremely welcoming of the film industry, and we offer a great filming incentive."

"South Dakota also offers tremendous variety, including mountains, forest, prairie, urban life, ghost towns, military forts, rural Americana, Native American culture, wildlife, unique terrain (the Badlands), the Missouri River, and so on. The options are limitless, and South Dakota truly is a breathtaking backdrop for film," Romkema concluded. 📍

