



Exploring the Stronghold District



A Vision for the Future

My grandfather gazed down at me, and his words burned in my mind. He said back then, as today, the Lakota lived as one with nature. The land, sky, water, and the four-legged still are interconnected with the Lakota who are original members of the buffalo nation (Pte Oyate). Each and everyone is respected for their place in the web of life. Presiding over all is the Great Spirit. Our legacy, these truths that come from our oral tradition of storytelling are taught to the people of the world at this place. These ideas burned in their minds too, my grandfather said. - Introduction to Heritage Center Location Study for Oglala Lakota Heritage Center on South Unit of Badlands National Park (November, 1994)

A Shared Responsibility in Badlands National Park

The Stronghold District, also known as the South Unit, of Badlands National Park is comprised of lands on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation owned by the Oglala Sioux Tribe and managed by the National Park Service under an agreement with the Tribe. The 133,300 acres of the Stronghold District were added to Badlands National Monument in 1976, prior to the monument becoming a park in 1978. Much of the land in the Stronghold Unit was previously used by the United States Air Force as an aerial gunnery range during World War II. Dominated by rugged badlands interspersed with mixed-grass prairie, the Stronghold District is less developed than the North Unit of the Park. There are currently few paved surfaces. Little of the National Park Service managed area is accessible by road. With the exception of Sheep Mountain Table, those hoping to explore the Stronghold District must obtain permission from individual landowners prior to crossing their land to reach the park.

White River Visitor Center: Starting Your Exploration

The White River Visitor Center (WRVC) is located 55 miles from the Ben Reifel Visitor Center, 20 miles south of Scenic on BIA 27. WRVC is a good point to begin an exploration of Pine Ridge Reservation. Exhibits on the history and culture of the Lakota people are available, as well as videos about Badlands National Park and the Lakota story. WRVC provides drinking water and restrooms. There is no official campground in the Stronghold District, but private campsites can be found throughout the area. Check for the available options and directions at the White River Visitor Center. Gas and food can be purchased in the nearby towns of Scenic, Kyle, and Sharps Corner.

Please note that the White River Visitor Center, as well as businesses in Scenic and other Pine Ridge Reservation communities, are seasonal. WRVC is typically open from early June through late August of each year. Businesses may be open sporadically. The general rule of thumb is when you see services that you need, use them immediately. The next opportunity for gas or food may be two or more hours away.

**For Best Results,
Leave Your Vehicle
Behind**

Traveling on foot is perhaps the best way to get to know the Stronghold District. Camping is permitted anywhere that is 800 meters from an established road or trail. Water found in the Badlands is laden with silt and cannot be purified, so all drinking water must be carried in. A topographic map is highly recommended, if not essential.

Backcountry areas are remote and not highly patrolled. It is advisable to travel in groups of two or more and to check in at the WRVC before setting out. If driving, a basic repair kit is recommended, as a breakdown can occur as far as 10 miles from a road. Be prepared for sudden changes in weather and bear in mind that roads become slick and impassable after rain. The risk of prairie fire is high. No open fires are allowed. Additionally, driving through tall grass should be avoided as the hot underside of your car could start a prairie fire. Surface debris left over from the gunnery range can still be found as historic litter. In addition to empty shells, unexploded ammunition is sometimes found eroding out of buttes. For your own safety, leave items of this sort in place and notify a ranger.

Roads and Tracks

True roads are a rarity in the Stronghold District. There are many “two tracks” worn into the landscape on private land as ranchers tend their cattle. These are not considered public access roads. You must obtain permission from private landowners before crossing their land to reach the National Park Service lands. These landowners can be difficult to identify or locate. Access and information on Stronghold and Cunny Tables can be obtained at the Cunny Table Cafe when open. The National Park Service cannot give you permission to cross private land. Off-road travel is prohibited in the Stronghold District.

Sheep Mountain Table Road is seven miles one way and is a rough road, carved out by homesteaders in the early days of the twentieth century. Receiving minimal maintenance, the Sheep Mountain Table Road becomes impassable during and after rain and is extremely rutted. It is suitable for four-wheel drive vehicles only.

Palmer Creek

To the east of the White River Visitor Center is an expanse of land labeled Palmer Creek Unit. A part of the Stronghold District, Palmer Creek is a part of the park but has no roads and few two tracks into it. It is almost virtually a land-locked island, inaccessible to vehicle travel. It is preferred that those wanting to explore Palmer Creek hike to this remote, completely undeveloped area. Some landowners adjacent to the Unit decline to give any permission to cross their land. Others will give permission if received well in advance. Because of its fossil re-sources, it is frequently studied by academic field trips. The National Park Service cannot give you permission to cross private land to enter Palmer Creek.

**Sacred Places,
Sacred Objects**

As you travel on Pine Ridge Reservation, particularly on the South Unit of Badlands National Park, you may find signs of religious worship. These could take the shape of prayer sticks or small bundles tied to branches. It could be simply a piece of brightly colored fabric tied to a shrub. These are signs of traditional worship by Tribal members. Please respect their beliefs and practices and leave these objects.

Stronghold Table is thought to be the site of the last Ghost Dance of the 19th century. Stronghold and Sheep Mountain Tables are also favorite sites for young Lakota men to go to fast and pray, hoping to have a vision for their future.