Headline: Badlands is just too good to pass up

Deckhead: South Dakota natural masterpiece opens minds and souls

Natural beauty doesn’t get much better than at Badlands National Park.

A jewel in South Dakota, its incredible rock formations, expansive horizons and animals attract more than 1 million visitors annually. They arrive with high expectations and leave in awe.

Badlands is the result of millions of years of rock formations and erosions that have made it one of the most impressive environmental attractions in the U.S. The park’s 244,000 acres protect an expanse of mixed-grass prairie that today are populated by bison, bighorn sheep, prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets. Many of the creatures roaming Badlands include some of the most endangered species in North America.

Badlands is nirvana for stargazers. The sky opens up at night. Its remote location and dearth of light pollution creates a perfectly dark palette to showcase the brightest stars. It’s clarity reveals constellations, the moon, satellites and airplanes.

But the unique darkness allows visitors to see planets, the Milky Way, star clusters, nebulae, the International Space Station, shooting stars and occasionally the aurora borealis – aka the northern lights.

Badlands’ natural wonders share similar splendor. Clastic Dikes are impossible to miss. They are vertical sheets of rock that crosscut the horizontal layers of the badlands. They normally are a different color than the surrounding rock, with tan, green and red shades most common. Many of the spectacular ridges and spires in the park are partially supported by clastic dikes.

Sod tables reside throughout the prairie land. These rarities are broken sections of grass and soil that sit atop badlands material. The different rates of erosion make it appear as if sod tables are springing out of the Badlands, where they actually are wearing away more slowly than the rock surrounding them.

Most archaeological sites found in Badlands have been discovered in sod tables, including those surrounding the Ancient Hunters Overlook. Tools, pottery, charcoal fragments and butchered bison bones from ancient inhabitants are preserved in the sod – some as long as 12,000 years.

Badlands Loop State Scenic Byway is recommended to visitors as the best way to tour the park. It’s a two-lane, 31-mile stretch that passes through buttes, cliffs and multi-colored spires. Drive cautiously. Wildlife roam the area and could wander onto parts of the roadway.

The highway contains numerous passes, 15 overlooks and eight trails. Big Badlands Overlook and the Door, Window and Notch Trail are must-visit attractions, as well as Pinnacles Overlook and Yellow Mounds Overlook.

Badlands is home to one of the richest fossil beds in the world. Tourists can visit the Fossil Preparation Lab. Watch park paleontologists perform fossil preparation. It includes identifying species based on fossil characteristics, removing rock from fossils and preparing and cataloguing finished specimens for display.

There are plenty of sights to witness. Visitors should take their time and absorb all Badlands has to offer. It’s certain to be a good time.

Cutline: COMING TO LIFE – The sun rises over the horizon of Badlands National Park. Image: Zak Zeinert. Adobe Stock.