

For those who like to climb on rocks, there is an unbeatable playground in South Dakota's Black Hills. Here are the Harney Peak "Needles", miniature mountains with their rock climbing problems in concentrated dosage.

Every year mountain climbers from the east visit us here briefly on their way home from a vacation in the mountains. They are climbers who like to climb -- who enjoy the subtle movements of the body on good firm rock and the challenge of steep rock faces with plenty of thin air beneath the feet. Looking for such experiences in the mountains, they discover that most mountain ascents are nine-tenths packing heavy loads through the underbrush or toiling up endless scree slopes. And when the summit cliffs are finally reached, the climbers are not at their climbing best due to bad weather, altitude sickness and a cramped shoulder from last night's bivouac.

They usually vow to spend their next vacation climbing in the Needles. For here there is endless opportunity to explore the vertical places unencumbered with heavy pack and unworried by the vagaries of the weather.

Climbers usually like the coarse but solid granite of the Needles. Big chunks of quartz and feldspar make an occasional "Thank God" handhold. Large mica projections make good holds too after you get used to the mica bending under your weight.

Geologists say the Needles were formed by weathering and erosion of a very old dome-shaped mass of granite forming the core of the Black Hills. Harney Peak, the center of the granite area, is the highest point in the United States east of the Rocky Mountains. For several miles on every side of the peak there are frequent outcroppings of pinnacles and crags. There are literally hundreds of challenging summits from fifty to five hundred feet in height.

One of the more massive outcrops is Mt. Rushmore, where Gutzon Borglum has carved the faces of four American presidents.

Some of the area is included in Custer State Park while the rest, except for a small tract at Mt. Rushmore supervised by the National Park Service, is Black Hills National Forest. State Route 87 is a paved road winding through the Needles east of Sylvan Lake, and other climbing areas may be reached from a good gravel road on the north side of Harney Peak. There are tourist accommodations at Sylvan Lake and free public campgrounds at both Sylvan and Horsethief Lakes.

Each of the Needles is different, with its own unique climbing problems. On the Bell Tower, a bold two hundred foot spire close to the Needles-Eye of post card fame, chimney climbing predominates. The first pitch is a tight wriggle chimney leading to the top of a low spur. Then a short but very delicate traverse on tiny holds leads around into a much wider chimney. This is bridged by the back and feet to reach another and higher spur. The final pitch is a face climb, high angle and very exposed, but well supplied with holds after the first treacherous step.

The finest climbs and the most spectacular summits are in the Cathedral Spires. Here one is well removed from the bustle of tourist traffic, and there is even an occasional grazing mountain goat to emphasize the isolation. Balcony Point, the southern peak of Spire Two, rises sheer nearly three hundred feet from the grassy valleys, and the final pitch involves a wicked pull up over an overhang with this dizzy drop directly beneath you. The Unapproachable, in the Six group, is a lean monster so tucked away among other pinnacles as to be almost unnoticeable. Hunting it out amid the labyrinth is a good



Spire One. The leader has reached the summit, and the second man contemplates the final pitch.

by herb and jan conn

Climbing Fun in the 'Needles'



Just a ten minute walk from the Needles Highway, the Cathedral Spires offer a variety of climbing.

exercise in route finding, and the climb to the summit is one that will not soon be forgotten. Spire One, shown in the illustration, is pure fun after a struggle in the initial chimney. The climbing route circles the pinnacle several times.

For those who like long climbs, difficult all the way, the four hundred foot face of Outer Outlet (near the outlet to Sylvan Lake) will serve to while away a strenuous day. Another group of impressive rocks, but much easier to climb, are the Elkhorn Mountain crags on the northeast ridge of Harney Peak. On one of these summits we found an elaborate register listing numerous visitors from a nearby guest ranch.

For the most part, though, the Needles are not climbed as much as they deserve. The lure of the high peaks on to the West works a potent magic during the long winter months. When vacation time rolls around again, climbers forget the friendly hills with their matchless rock climbing and return to their annual sojourn in rain-soaked camps at the foot of even longer scree slopes. Well, strange are the ways of the mountaineer!





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