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RAMBLING AROUND SOUTHEAST MONTANA

BY SUSIE WALL



The southeastern section of Montana covers over 30,000 square miles on the state's map. This vast swath of landscape consists of long stretches of empty blacktop, acres and acres of public lands, and small towns populated by friendly folk that can trace their Montana roots back generations.

It takes a special kind of person to appreciate traveling in this corner of the state. Does the thought of being the only car at the trailhead give you a thrill? Do you enjoy

having people you have never met smile and wave? Do you relish eating at mom-and-pop diners over chain restaurants? Are you comfortable replacing your navigation app with a paper map?

If you responded with an emphatic "yes" to any or all of these questions, congratulations! You are that special kind of person. Gas up your car (seriously, top off the tank), load up on snacks, pack that paper map previously mentioned and get ready to ramble around Southeast Montana.

TOWN BOUND

While Billings, Montana's largest city, is located in the southeast, populations of most of the towns found here range from a few hundred to a few thousand souls. Don't let their size fool you as each one has something unique to offer.

Terry is small but mighty, packing a wallop of notable stops within a town of less than 600 residents. Book a room at the historic Kempton Hotel, Montana's oldest continuously operating hotel. The rooms are small but cozy and offer all the necessary conveniences. Pop across the street to visit the Prairie County Museum and Evelyn Cameron Gallery. An adventurous woman and gifted photographer, Cameron lugged her heavy camera across the region on horseback at the turn of the 20th century taking pictures that perfectly captured life on the prairie.

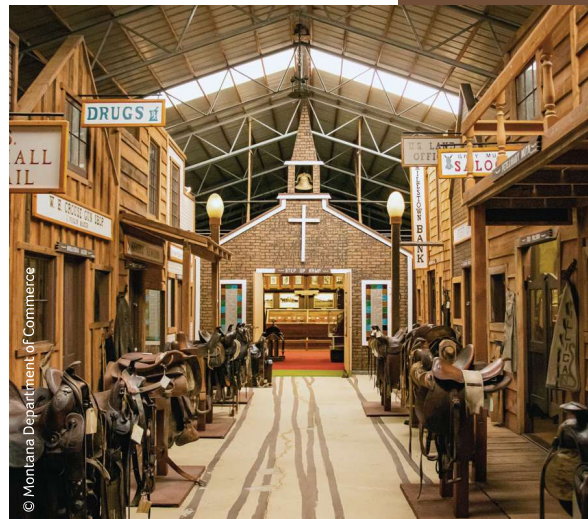


Baker is home to the O'Fallon Historical Museum, the eternal resting place of the world's largest steer that stood just under six feet tall and weighed a whopping 3,980 pounds. Baker is also home to not one, but three stops on the Southeast Montana Burger Trail. Chow down at Heiser's Bar with an order of the Sriracha Bacon Pepper Jack Burger. Clocking in at eight pounds, you may wonder if there is a connection between the burger and the massive steer back at the museum.

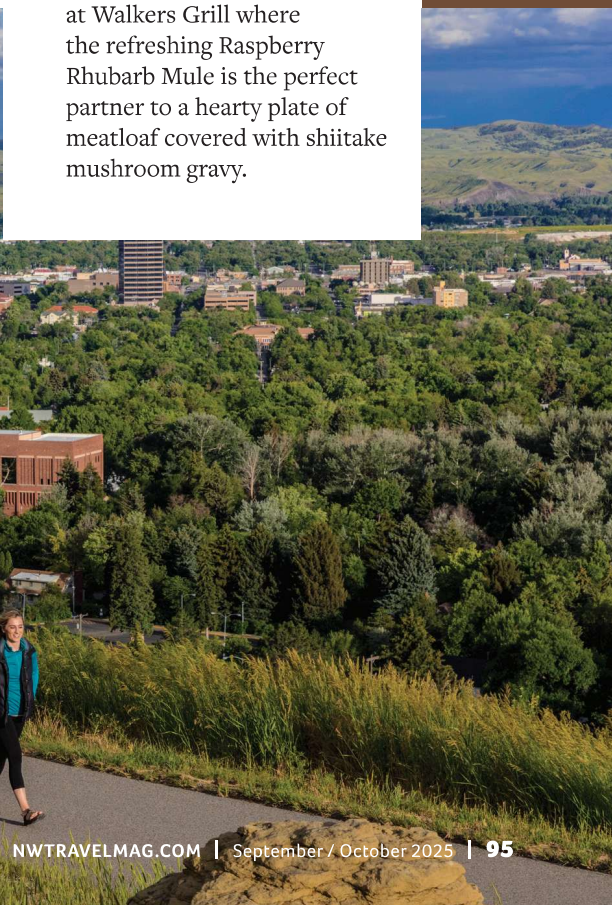
Miles City offers up western history, culture and plenty of retail therapy. Start with a visit to the Range Riders Museum, a sprawling complex with rooms full of clothing, rifles and branding irons that tell the story of this ranching community. Located behind the museum along the banks of the Yellowstone River is the WaterWorks Art Museum. The museum is housed in the concrete building that provided Miles City's drinking water for over 60 years. Exhibits include historical photographs and rotating works by local artisans.

Belly up to the soda fountain for a creamy shake at Vintage & Rustics on Main Street before wandering the aisles

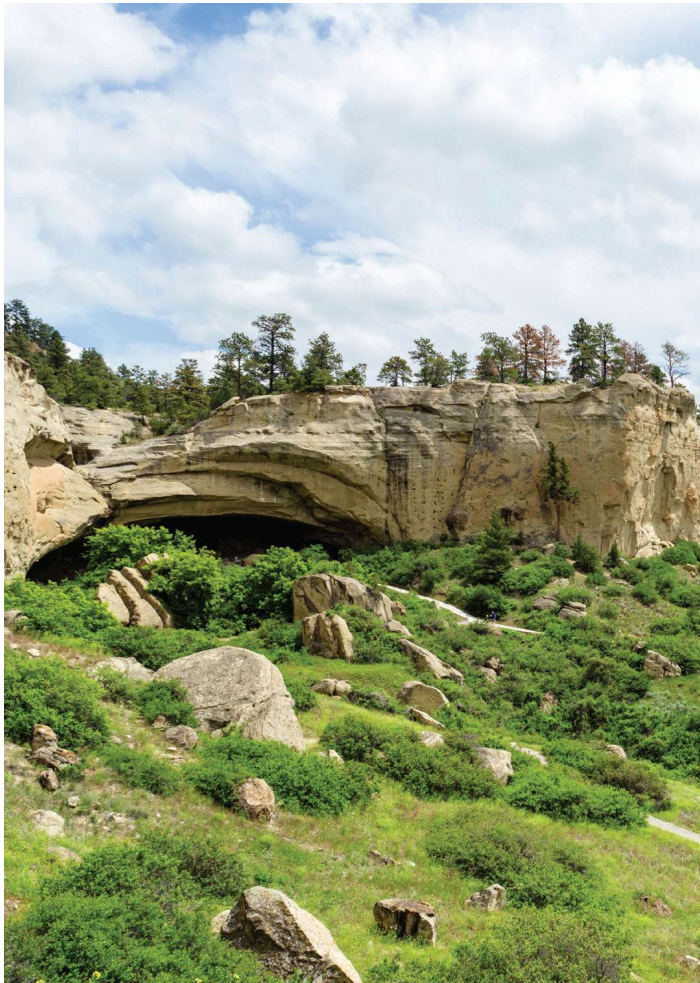
of this enormous store shopping for everything from antiques to clothing to home goods. Across the street, Miles City Saddlery has been outfitting riders on the range, and their trusty steeds, since 1909.



Make time to stay a while in **Billings**. Stroll beside the mighty Yellowstone at Riverfront Park. Listen for the howls of grey wolves at ZooMontana. Check into the luxurious Northern Hotel downtown before relaxing at Walkers Grill where the refreshing Raspberry Rhubarb Mule is the perfect partner to a hearty plate of meatloaf covered with shiitake mushroom gravy.



INDIGENOUS CULTURE



Travel back in time at Pictograph Cave State Park on the outskirts of Billings. A short but steep trek will bring you to the namesake cave where you will witness ghostly drawings made centuries ago emerge from the low light on the shallow cave walls. A pair of binoculars is highly recommended to best see the images.

The Crow Indian Reservation, Montana's largest Native American reservation, encompasses

2.3 million acres from south of Billings to the Wyoming border. Take time to explore significant Indigenous sites while driving across the reservation. In Pryor, tour the home of the last traditional chief of the Apsáalooke, the traditional name of the Crow people, at Chief Plenty Coups State Park and walk the lush grounds listening to the prairie wind rustle the waving snake grass.



With all this open space and jaw-dropping scenery, it is no wonder this region is a mecca for outdoor recreation. Unlike the towering peaks and dense forests in the western part of Montana, the southeastern landscape features rocky cliffs, miles of trails that crisscross the prairie, and wide rivers flush with fish.

Glendive is home to Makoshika State Park, Montana largest state park, and one of its least visited thanks to the isolated location. The park's name is a variation on the Lakota phrase meaning "bad land." Drive the one paved road leading through the heart of the park to get your bearings before hitting the many hiking trails that afford sweeping views of colorful rock formations.



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NATURAL WONDERS

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Medicine Rocks State Park is an isolated gem just north of Ekalaka. Eons of erosion have created pillars of pock-marked sandstone that rise up from the grasslands. A short drive and a few hikes bring you to the base of these eerie columns. The lack of visitors also attracts a wealth of wildlife like pronghorn antelope and red-headed woodpeckers.

Those up for a challenge should head to the Terry Badlands where 44,000 acres of sedimentary rock have been battered for thousands of years by wind and water carving out natural arches, bridges, and spires. There are no designated trails so solid navigation skills are a must. Be sure to glean vital knowledge about road conditions in the badlands from the locals in Terry to avoid what Montanans call "gumbo," a gnarly mixture of rain and bentonite clay akin to wet cement that suck up your tires and refuse to let go. Because while rambling around Southeast Montana is a wondrous experience, getting stuck is a whole other story. 🌀



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