



THE MONTANA NATIONAL MONUMENTS GUIDEBOOK

A visitor's guide to the history, culture, and landscapes of Little Bighorn, Pompeys Pillar, and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monuments.



VISITING MONTANA'S NATIONAL MONUMENTS

Montana has plenty of spectacular public lands to check out, but there is something special about the state's three National Monuments. Just like National Forests and Parks, National Monuments can protect habitat and ecosystems and give the public access to great places to hike, camp, hunt, bike, and other traditional public land uses. But it's their unique focus on historic and cultural preservation that makes National Monuments such a special and important conservation tool.

Montana's three very different monuments – Little Bighorn Battlefield, Pompeys Pillar, and the Upper Missouri River Breaks – are incredible places to visit to see how Monument designation protects culture, history, and wildlife.

All three are located in the central and eastern part of the state, and Pompeys Pillar and Little Bighorn are just a one hour drive apart. They make a good pair to visit in one trip, but our third monument, the massive Upper Missouri River Breaks, deserves its own trip.

LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT



The first National Monument established in Montana is holy ground to many people. Little Bighorn Battlefield NM is the site of one of North America's most famous battlefields, and it is the final resting place of many of the brave warriors and soldiers who fought in the epic clash.

Located on the Crow reservation along the ridges, bluffs, and ravines of the Little Bighorn River, the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument memorializes one of the most iconic battles in American history. The Battle of Little Bighorn was fought on this spot on June 25-26, 1876, between the United States Seventh Cavalry Regiment led by Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer along with their Crow, and Arikara scouts, and the warriors of the Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes led by Sitting Bull.

DID YOU KNOW?

Near Crow Agency,
about 60 miles east of
Billings on I-90.

The Little Bighorn
Battlefield National
Monument was originally
named Custer Battlefield
National Monument
when designated by
President Truman in 1946.
President George H.W.
Bush renamed the site on
December 10, 1991.



LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD

The Battle of the Little Bighorn (the Battle of the Greasy Grass to the Lakota) has come to exemplify the friction of two considerably different cultures: the buffalo/horse culture of the northern plains tribes and the highly industrial based culture of the United States.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

The Little Bighorn Battlefield Visitor Center and Museum is a great place to start your tour of the Monument. The center holds a number of interesting artifacts from the battle including weapons and equipment, a theater that shows a powerful film about the battle, and rangers and native speakers who give frequent lectures and tours.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

The battlefield and landscape are well-preserved, and walking along Battle Ridge, it's easy to look down in the valley and imagine the vast village of teepees along the river, to see warriors on horseback boiling up from the brushy draws. The land teaches in a way that books cannot. There are two main areas to the battlefield, Last Stand Hill/Battle Ridge, which is near the visitor's center, and the Reno-Benteen Battlefield, four and a half miles to the southeast.

Simple white stone markers stud the battlefield, marking the approximate locations of where troops and warriors fell dead. Between the Battle Ridge and the Reno-Benteen battlefields, there are plenty of well-marked locations of critical events during the fight. Private land also stands between the two spots, and it's not uncommon to see Native ranchers on horseback moving their large horse herds across the battlefield.

A great way to explore the monument and get a new perspective on the battle is to book a Native tour guide. The knowledgeable Native guides of [Apsaalooke Tours](#) run private and group tours during the summer months.

Don't Miss: The Crow Fair and the Annual Battle of the Little Bighorn Reenactment

Held the third weekend in August at Crow Agency, [Crow Fair](#) is one of the biggest rodeos in Montana and one of the most respected powwows for all of North America's tribes. The Crow are famous for their horsemanship, and you'll see incredible displays of bareback riding and racing. It's a fantastic celebration of modern and traditional Native culture.

Taking place most years around the third week of June, the [Annual Battle of the Little Bighorn Reenactment](#) is hosted by the Real Bird Family. The enactment takes place at Medicine Tail Coulee, famous location from the battle, and uses Native riders—no whites as braves—and authentic equipment, weapons, and dress.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

Roadtrip: The Warrior Trail

To go deeper into the landscape and Native culture and history, expand your visit to Little Bighorn NM into an adventurous road trip through the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservations along the Tongue River loop of the Warrior Trail. Many sections are remote and follow rough gravel roads, but you'll see things and meet folks you otherwise wouldn't know about if you simply stick to the highway.

From the battlefield, head east on the Warrior Trail (US 212). At Busby, you'll see the Two Moons monument, a tribute to the great Chief of the Northern Cheyenne at the battle of Little Bighorn. Head south on Big Horn County Road 314 for 20 miles to reach Rosebud Battlefield State Park. This is the spot where, eight days before the fight on the Bighorn, Crazy Horse and other Sioux and Northern Cheyenne warriors battled General George Cooks's cavalry.

Unlike the more famous National Monument, this site is kept primitive, looking much the same as it did over 145 years ago. The park also has a buffalo jump and clearly visible teepee rings. As you poke around the grounds, keep an eye out for rattlesnakes!

Continue on for fishing and camping on Tongue River Reservoir State Park, then loop north past the Wolf Mountains Battlefield National Landmark, the settlements of Birny and finally back to Busby and then finish at Crow Agency, near Little Bighorn NM.

Nearby Camping

The nearby Custer National Forest offers a couple of unique options for camping. The Diamond Butte Lookout is a 30-foot tower, and the Whitetail Cabin is a 1930s structure reachable by road. Make sure you reserve in advance at [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov).

UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS NATIONAL MONUMENT



From the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge to Fort Benton, the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument traverses 149 miles of the Upper Missouri River, the neighboring Breaks country, and parts of Arrow Creek, Antelope Creek, and the Judith River. The Monument lies in the heart of one of the most uniquely beautiful parts of Montana, a wild region of canyons, coulees, buttes, and steep bluffs that is thick with interesting biological, geological, and historical objects and places.

When a lot of Montanans talk about “the Breaks,” they get a dreamy look in their eyes. To some, the Breaks means a wall-tent hunting camp and big mule deer bucks. Others know and love the Breaks as one of the state's premier boating destinations, with hundreds of miles of water to explore and terrific fishing. History buffs make a pilgrimage to the Breaks because it is the best spot on the Lewis and Clark trail to see the river through the eyes of the explorers. It’s a place where you can launch a canoe and paddle and camp for days through an area that is largely unchanged in the 200 years since the expedition.



UPPER MISSOURI RIVER BREAKS

PLAN YOUR VISIT

Vast portions of the monument are serviced only by rough gravel roads. Much of the monument is not accessible by any road, inviting visitors to explore on foot.

Visitors are encouraged to visit the [Missouri Breaks Interpretive Center](#) in Fort Benton or the Lewistown or Havre Bureau of Land Management Field Offices no matter how they plan to explore this remote region. Staff at all locations will be able to assist with maps, local outfitters, closure information, and general safety tips. All visitors are encouraged to carry a map and have basic land navigation skills before exploring the remote areas of the Monument.

Within the Monument you can float the river, fish, hike, hunt, drive for pleasure, find a little solitude, enjoy a sense of exploration in a remote setting or simply marvel at the variety of natural beauty. But Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument is made for hunting and paddling.

Many of the public land features in this monument are intermingled with private property. Many landowners in this area are multi-generation central Montana ranchers. Their stewardship of these lands has contributed greatly to maintaining the area's unique qualities and values. Remember, you must have permission from the landowner before entering onto private property. Please respect the important contributions these landowners have made to this area and respect landowner rights.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

Hunt the Breaks

The entire Upper Missouri River Breaks area is world famous for its big game herds; the elk, sheep, and deer herds draw hunters from across the state, and the elk harvest on the Monument almost matches its famous neighbor – the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge – in regards to hunter success. The Monument has outstanding mule deer habitat with a high hunter success rating, and is a popular destination for traditional deer camps.

It's tough to draw a tag, but the Monument has a growing bighorn sheep herd, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks boasts a 100 percent hunter success rate on sheep every year.

The uplands above the river give bird hunters and their dogs plenty of terrific habitat to explore for pheasants, hungarian partridges, and sharptail grouse.

The roads become impassable with wet weather. Just a bit of rain will turn the roads into thick gumbo mud, so hunters should watch the forecast and always travel with chains, jacks, and other emergency off-road equipment.

Gateway Town: Fort Benton's History and Museums

Fort Benton started as an American Fur Company trading post and one of the most important trade centers in the Northwest. Some of the beautiful old buildings reflect Fort Benton's prosperous past, and there are a few good museums in town that are worth a visit. The Museum of the Upper Missouri has great displays on the place's early days as a trading center, and they run guided tours of the Old Fort. If you want to learn more about the homesteading and agriculture in the area, check out the Museum of the Great Plain. The Upper Missouri River Breaks Interpretive Center is a must-visit for anyone visiting the national monument.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

Float the Breaks

Most folks put in from Fort Benton or Fort Peck to float the Wild and Scenic portion of the river that flows the length of the monument. The average floater achieves 15-20 miles per day. Mileage is dependent on weather conditions and personal ability. Most parties take seven days to float the 149 river miles between Fort Benton and the Fort Robinson bridge.

Presently no permit is required for a non-commercial float on the Upper Missouri unless your group size is greater than 30. In this case you need to apply for a Special Recreation Permit by contacting the Fort Benton River Management Station at (877) 256-3252.

All boaters are encouraged to register before they begin their trip. This allows the BLM to gather accurate visitor-use statistics to help better manage the river and can be vital in the case of an emergency. Boaters can register at the Fort Benton Fairgrounds, the Fort Benton Visitor Center, Wood Bottom, Coal Banks Landing, Judith Landing and James Kipp Recreation Area.

Weather extremes are common while floating the Upper Missouri. Snowstorms can occur at any time during the floating season, especially late spring and early fall. Take time to plan for the worst possible conditions if you go in May, June, September or October. Sudden violent thunderstorms, frequent in the summer months, can plummet temperatures 20° to 50° in minutes and create dangerous conditions along the river including lightning, high winds and hail.

There are no established trails along the river corridor. Dispersed hiking can be enjoyed anywhere on public lands. If hiking the sandstone cliffs along the river, take caution because these areas are fragile and crumble easily.

There are primitive three-sided wooden shelters available at Hole-in-the-Wall and Slaughter River campsites. No other shelters are available on public land.

There is a mandatory portable toilet regulation for anyone camping overnight between Fort Benton and James Kipp Recreation Area.

If you're looking to book a commercial trip, lots of companies work in the area. Two established and reliable outfitters are [Upper Missouri River Guides](#) and [Missouri River Outfitters](#).

POMPEYS PILLAR

NATIONAL MONUMENT



Our smallest National Monument is a striking sandstone outcrop looming over the Yellowstone River. It's also a signpost, a lookout, and one incredible collection of graffiti.

Pompeys Pillar National Monument covers 51 acres on the banks of the Yellowstone River, all around its namesake Monolith, a massive sandstone outcrop covering about two acres at its base and rising 120 feet. It's impressive to see, but look closer and you'll start to understand why it's a National Monument.

The tower has been an important site to the people who live here going back over 11,000 years, and history is written on its walls.

DID YOU KNOW?

National Monuments are created out of existing Federal Land through the Antiquities Act, one of our nation's most important conservation tools. Since it became law, it's been used by 18 presidents from both parties to safeguard and preserve existing federal lands with important cultural and historical sites that should be available for all Americans to enjoy.

Enacted in 1906, it was the United States' first federal law recognizing the importance and value of the places and objects that represent the country's history and prehistory. The act protected historical and archaeological sites and gave the President authority to establish national monuments to help protect and preserve these essential areas. The 59th U.S. Congress passed the act, and President Theodore Roosevelt signed it into law on June 8, 1906.



POMPEYS PILLAR

Why this rock is so special has a lot to do with location. The Monument's prime location at a natural ford in the Yellowstone River, and its geologic distinction as the only significant sandstone formation in the area, have made Pompeys Pillar a celebrated landmark and unique observation point for many, many people for at least 11,000 years. Hundreds of markings, petroglyphs, and inscriptions have transformed this geologic phenomenon into a living journal of the history of the American West.

The Pillar was used for centuries as a preferred campsite by the Crow Tribe and other Native peoples as they traveled through the area on trading, hunting, war, or other expeditions. Archaeological and ethnographic evidence suggest that the Pillar was also a place of religious and ritual activity. Throughout the 19th century, early settlers, fur trappers, railroad workers, and military expeditions used the sandstone to register their passing.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

Most people probably know the tower from one prominent visitor, the one who named it and left his own calling card. Captain William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition named the Pillar “Pompy’s Tower” in honor of Sacagawea’s son Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, whom he had nicknamed “Pomp.” Nicholas Biddle, the first editor of Lewis and Clark’s journals, changed the name to “Pompeys Pillar.” Pompeys Pillar bears the only remaining physical evidence of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with William Clark carving his name and the date, July 25, 1806, on the face of the butte. Both the sandstone and Clark’s signature appear the same as they did over 200 years ago.

Clark’s signature isn’t the only thing to see (also, the reason it’s so high is the surrounding bluff has eroded since his famous graffiti). The viewpoint on the Pillar requires a little climb, but the view is worth it. Clark and countless others have stood in this spot, and if you squint and imagine the highways, roads, and buildings gone, you can picture what this stretch of Yellowstone River must’ve looked like to Clark and nameless many who have come before

Canoe to the Pillar

A fun and different way to visit the pillar is by canoe, and several paddling outfitters in the area offer trips along the Yellowstone that stop at the Monument.

Don’t Miss: Pictograph Cave State Historic Site

If you see the carvings on Pompey’s Tower, you really shouldn’t miss the nearby Pictograph Cave State Historic Site. Just seven miles southeast of Billings near the Lockwood exit on I-90, it’s where some of Montana’s most significant archaeological artifacts have been found.

Paid for by The MCV Education Fund
432 N Last Chance Gulch, Ste J
PO Box 1814
Helena, MT 59624-1814
United States

MCVEF is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization.
All contributions are tax-deductible.