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Black Hills Road Trip

Jun 30, 2024 - Jul 6, 2024

Trip Summary

June 30 - Sunday - Drive to Sioux Falls

Drive to Sioux Falls, SD - Google Maps

3:00 PM

Check in at SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls - SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls

Options To Do

July 1 - Monday - Sculpture Garden, Corn Palace, 1880 Town

12:00 PM

Check out from SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls - SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls

Drive to Under Canvas - Google Maps

Porter Sculpture Park

Mitchell Corn Palace

1880 Town

Badlands Ranch Store

Wall Drug

Check in at Under Canvas Mount Rushmore - Under Canvas Mount Rushmore

July 2 - Tuesday - Mount Rushmore

Explore Mt Rushmore

Avenue of Flags and Grand View Terrace

Sculptor's Studio

Lincoln Borglum Visitor Center

HIKE: The Presidential Trail

July 3 - Wednesday - Needles Hwy, Syvan Lake, Custer Park

Needles Hwy, Sylvan Lake, Iron Mountain Road - Google Maps

Needles Hwy - Google Maps

Sylvan Lake

Needles Eye Tunnel

State Game Lodge

Iron Mountain Road

July 4 - Thursday - South Custer & Hot Springs - Drive to Badlands

Check out at Under Canvas Mount Rushmore - Under Canvas Mount Rushmore

Wind Caves, hot Springs, Mammoth Park - Google Maps

Wind Cave National Park

HIKE: Prairie Vista Trail

Bison Flats

Mammoth Site

LUNCH: Tow Cows Creamery in Hot Springs - Two Cows Creamery & Bistro | Hot Springs, SD , Google Maps

Rankin Ridge Trail

NPS 5 & 6 Backcountry Roads

Wildlife Loop Road

Check in at Budget Host Badlands Motel Interior - Budget Host Badlands Motel Interior

July 5 - Friday - Badlands

Badlands Hikes - Google Maps

HIKE: The Notch Trail

HIKE: The Window Trail

HIKE: The Door Trail

HIKE: Cliff Shelf Trail

Fossil Preparation Lab

HIKE: Fossil Exhibit Trail

Evening Drive - Google Maps

Sage Creek Rim Road

Badlands Loop Road

July 6 - Saturday- Head home

No Plans for This Day

June 30 - Sunday - Drive to Sioux Falls



Drive to Sioux Falls, SD



Google Maps



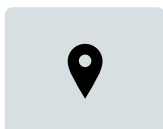
CHECK-IN 3:00 PM - Central Daylight Time

Check in at SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls

CONFIRMATION NUMBER	BOOKED THROUGH	ROOM / BED TYPE
71384948	Marriott	Studio, 2 Queen, Sofa bed

Location

This hotel is located in Sioux Falls. The nearest airport is Sioux Falls (FSD).



SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls

4304 West Empire Place, Sioux Falls, United States



Options To Do

ON THE WAY:

Palisades State Park

IN SIOUX FALLS:

[Great Plains Zoo](#) - Open until 5pm

Falls Park & Sculpture Walk

[Butterfly House & Aquarium](#) - open until 4pm

July 1 - Monday - Sculpture Garden, Corn Palace, 1880 Town



CHECK-OUT 12:00 PM - Central Daylight Time
Check out from **SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls**



SpringHill Suites Sioux Falls

4304 West Empire Place, Sioux Falls, United States



Drive to Under Canvas



Google Maps



Porter Sculpture Park

[WEBSITE](#)

Admission: \$10 FOR ADULTS, \$5 Ages 13-17, Ages 12 & under Free

Opens @ 7am



Mitchell Corn Palace

FREE



1880 Town

Lunch at the 50s Diner? (3hrs & 40 min from Sioux Falls)

[WEBSITE](#)



Badlands Ranch Store
Feed The Prairie Dogs



Wall Drug



Check in at Under Canvas Mount Rushmore



Under Canvas Mount Rushmore
24342 Ranch Road, Keystone, SD, US, 57751

July 2 - Tuesday - Mount Rushmore



Explore Mt Rushmore

It's time to get in and explore Mount Rushmore! This national memorial took 14 years to sculpt into the granite peaks of the Black Hills and was completed in 1941. It features the heads of United States presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. When you arrive at Mount Rushmore, you will be required to pay a parking fee. Because this is a parking fee and not an entrance fee, your NPS Annual Pass (America the Beautiful, Senior, Access, etc.) will not get you in for free.

After paying the parking fee, proceed to the parking garages, find a spot, and walk to the columns at the memorial entrance. A self-guided tour is available for rent at the memorial entrance. This is optional – you don't have to pay for the tour to have a good time at Mount Rushmore, but you will learn a lot as you wander the memorial grounds with it



Avenue of Flags and Grand View Terrace

The Avenue of Flags is a grand welcome to Mount Rushmore! As you approach the memorial, each side of the walkway is lined with flags representing the 50 states, 3 territories, 1 district, and 2 commonwealths that make up the United States.

At the end of the Avenue of Flags, you'll find yourself at the Grand View Terrace. This is the main viewpoint for Mount Rushmore.



Sculptor's Studio

The Sculptor's Studio was the second on-site studio of Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor of Mount Rushmore. Today, this studio contains a model that is 1/12th the size of the memorial and is the best place to go to learn about how the mountain was sculpted.

I highly suggest being here for **the ranger program that runs throughout the day** (typically on the hour and half-hour for about 15 minutes). You'll learn about the tools and daring methods the workers used to make Mount Rushmore a reality!



Lincoln Borglum Visitor Center

Step inside the memorial's main visitor to chat with a ranger, enjoy various exhibits, or watch the park film. This is a good time to pick up junior ranger books for anyone in your group who wants to earn a Mount Rushmore badge!



HIKE: The Presidential Trail

0.6 mi. RT

The Presidential Trail travels to the base of Mount Rushmore – this is as close to the memorial as you can get! As you walk along this trail, you'll find informational plaques about the presidents that are featured on the mountain. There are several viewing platforms and good photo opportunities along the way.

I recommend **hiking this trail clockwise** from the visitor center to cut down on the number of stairs you have to climb up. The first 0.2 miles of the Presidential Trail is a wheelchair-friendly boardwalk, but after that, you'll be climbing up and down stone steps (422 to be exact!) as you travel across the base of the mountain beneath Mount Rushmore.

From the visitor center, if you're facing Mount Rushmore, take a left and walk to the pathway that starts from the side of the visitor center. This is the beginning of the Presidential Trail.

July 3 - Wednesday - Needles Hwy, Sylvan Lake, Custer Park



Needles Hwy, Sylvan Lake, Iron Mountain Road



[Google Maps](#)



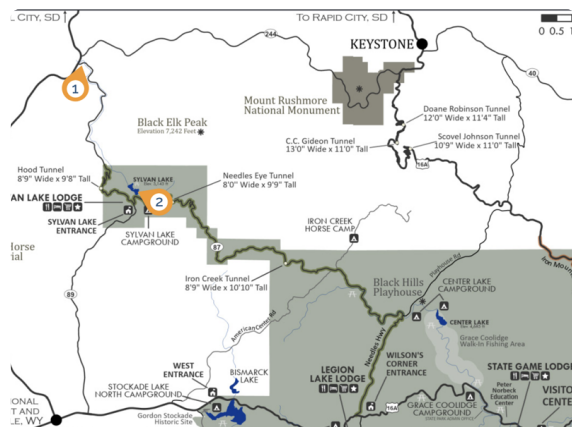
Needles Hwy

Your morning begins on the dramatic Needles Highway in Custer State Park. This is a must-do drive in the Black Hills! This 14-mile road winds through the forest and travels among the amazing needle-like granite formations known as the Needles.

The Needles Highway has some fun tunnels, but they are small! The smallest tunnel along this route is 8 feet wide and 9 feet 9 inches tall. Do not drive this road in a large vehicle or RV unless you can easily clear the tunnels!

Be sure to take a look at the map before you go to see the tunnel locations and sizes. You'll complete a portion of the drive before you get to Sylvan Lake, and then the rest after your time at the lake.

From Rapid City, drive west on Highway 16 for 22 miles. When you reach the town of Three Forks, stay left at the fork to stay on Highway 16 traveling to Hill City and Custer. Continue following this road for 7 miles (through Hill City) until you see the turn-off for the Needles Highway on your left. The sign points toward Highway 87 South/Needles Highway/Sylvan Lake. Turn left here to begin driving the Needles Highway



[Google Maps](#)



Sylvan Lake

Sylvan Lake is the most popular lake in the Black Hills (and one of the most beautiful)! You'll love spending some time enjoying the sparkling water surrounded by granite cliffs. This is the lake that is featured in National Treasure 2, but you won't find it behind Mount Rushmore...it's here in Custer State Park.

I suggest starting your time at Sylvan Lake by getting parking in the day-use lot and then **walking around the lake on the Sylvan Lake Shore Trail. This trail is 1.1 miles with about 80 feet of elevation gain.**

After walking around the lake, you can canoe or paddleboard on the glassy water. Bring your own if you have one, otherwise, you can rent various non-motorized boats at the Sylvan Lake General Store.

If you're feeling extra adventurous, you'll find a lovely swim beach on the northern part of the lake near the day-use parking lot.

*Note: You're here early in the morning when the temperatures still might be a little chilly for swimming, but this lake gets packed as the day goes on and parking becomes a nightmare, so I suggest getting here early and enjoying the solitude. If you want to stay and swim, bring a picnic lunch or drive over to the **Sylvan Lake Lodge** for lunch and leave Sylvan Lake around 12:30 instead!*

Follow the Needles Highway for 5.8 miles until you reach Sylvan Lake. Don't park at the Sylvan Lake Lodge – keep driving a bit further to the intersection where you'll see a sign for the Needles Highway/Park Entrance Station/Sylvan Lake. Turn left here and drive for another 0.2 miles to Sylvan Lake. You can park in the big parking lot near the Sylvan Lake General Store, especially if you plan on renting canoes or paddleboards. Or, you can drive past the general store parking and take a left, following signs for the Sylvan Lake Day Use Area and the Black Elk Peak Trailhead. This takes you closer to the swim beach.



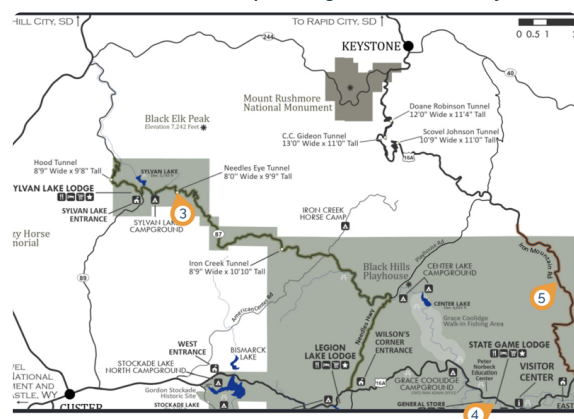
Needles Eye Tunnel

As you leave Sylvan Lake and head toward the Iron Mountain Road, you'll drive through the most exciting part of the Needles Highway – the Needles Eye Tunnel.

This tunnel is extremely narrow at only 8 feet wide! Squeeze through here and enjoy the views of the Needles as you drive this scenic road. This section of the road is also where the Needles Highway gets its name. Spires of granite shoot toward the sky in every direction.

Just after going through the Needles Eye Tunnel, you'll reach the **Cathedral Spires Trailhead**. This trail is 1.6 miles round trip with about 500 feet of elevation gain, and it's a great hike to add to your schedule if you don't want to spend the whole morning at Sylvan Lake.

From Sylvan Lake, take a left (east) onto Highway 87 to continue driving the rest of the Needles Highway. Follow the road for another 13.5 miles, passing the Needles Eye Tunnel along the way.



State Game Lodge

As you finish up the Needles Highway, you'll hit Highway 16A. Take a left onto Highway 16A East, following signs for the State Game Lodge and Visitor Center. Drive for 5 miles to reach the State Game Lodge.



Iron Mountain Road

As the day goes on, you're getting closer and closer to Mount Rushmore! There's no better way to get excited about visiting Mount Rushmore than by driving the Iron Mountain Road in Custer State Park.

The Iron Mountain Road was designed to force you to slow down and enjoy the scenery. This road has 314 curves and 14 switchbacks as it cuts through the stunning Black Hills. But the best part is the three tunnels that perfectly frame Mount Rushmore!

As you drive north along the Iron Mountain Road, you'll see Mount Rushmore from varying distances as you drive through each tunnel. In addition to the beautiful scenery, it is so much fun to see Mount Rushmore in such a unique way!

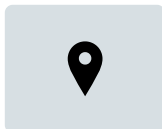
Similar to the Needles Highway, you'll want to pay close attention to the size of the tunnels if you're driving a larger vehicle or RV. The smallest tunnel on the Iron Mountain Road is 10 feet 9 inches wide and 11 feet tall.

From the State Game Lodge, drive east along Highway 16A for 3.4 miles. Turn left to stay on Highway 16A, following signs for Iron Mountain Road/Mount Rushmore. This begins your 18-mile drive along the Iron Mountain Road.

July 4 - Thursday - South Custer & Hot Springs - Drive to Badlands



Check out at Under Canvas Mount Rushmore

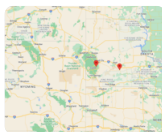


Under Canvas Mount Rushmore

24342 Ranch Road, Keystone, SD, US, 57751



Wind Caves, hot Springs, Mammoth Park



Google Maps



Wind Cave National Park

From Rapid City, drive west on Highway 16 for 22 miles. When you reach the town of Three Forks, stay left at the fork to stay on Highway 16 traveling to Hill City and Custer. Continue following this road for 17 miles as it travels through Hill City and Custer. When you reach the town of Custer, take a left at the intersection with Mount Rushmore Road and drive for 0.5 miles, then take a left onto Highway 385 toward Wind Cave and Hot Springs. Drive along Highway 385 for 18.5 miles until you reach Wind Cave National Park. Your cave tour begins at the visitor center, so look for the right turn toward the visitor center, cave tours, and campground and drive along this road for about one mile until you reach the visitor center.



HIKE: Prairie Vista Trail

The Prairie Vista Trail is a short loop trail that provides a fabulous introduction to the beautiful surface of Wind Cave National Park. This trail starts at the visitor center, travels past the cave's natural entrance, and then takes you through the prairie grass until you descend down the hill to the visitor center.

As you walk along this short loop, you'll pass by two fascinating sights that will enhance your appreciation of the cave. The first is the natural entrance, a small hole that "breathes". If you stand close, you can often feel the wind blowing in or out through the entrance. Discovering this unique natural entrance is what sparked decades of exploration and gave the cave its name.

The second thing of note is a gravestone you'll pass by as you descend the hill at the end of your hike. This is the gravestone of Alvin McDonald, a boy who single-handedly explored and mapped a huge portion of Wind Cave (with only candlelight and string!) from the age of 16 until his death at age 20.

You can learn more about Alvin in the visitor center – they even have his original journal on display. Be sure to stay on the trail as you hike the Prairie Vista Trail, and if you bring a dog, you'll need to keep him leashed. This route is known for having ticks and poison ivy just off the established trail.

Keep your car parked in the visitor center parking lot. After completing your cave tour, walk out the back doors of the visitor center and walk along the trail that travels north of the building. You'll pass by the natural entrance to Wind Cave before reaching the picnic area. Keep walking to the northern end of the picnic area to find the Prairie Vista Trail.





Bison Flats

As you drive south of the Wind Cave Visitor Center, you'll go through an area known as Bison Flats. As its name suggests, this is a fantastic place to see bison, but you might also see elk, deer, pronghorn, or coyotes!

After completing the Prairie Vista Loop, get back in your car and drive south of the visitor center for about a mile until you reach Highway 385. Turn right onto Highway 385 and start looking for buffalo. This is the Bison Flats area!



Mammoth Site

The Mammoth Site in the town of Hot Springs is an active dig site and the largest mammoth research facility in the world! Over 60 mammoths have been fossilized and uncovered here, as well as a large range of other late Ice Age creatures.

Walking around the dig site is incredible, and you will often see paleontologists working to uncover more fossils while you're here.

If your group loves fossils, you'll enjoy this stop. The Mammoth Site is conveniently located only 20 minutes south of the Wind Cave Visitor Center, so it's easy to pop in here while visiting the park.

From Bison Flats, continue driving south on Highway 385 for 9.5 miles until you reach the town of Hot Springs. Turn left to stay on Highway 385/River Street and drive for another 0.6 miles. When the road begins to curve to the left, stay left and then take a right to stay on Highway 385 South. Follow Highway 385 for one mile, and then turn right onto Highway 18 BYP/Indianapolis Ave. Drive for one mile until you see the Mammoth Site on your right.



LUNCH: Tow Cows Creamery in Hot Springs



Two Cows Creamery & Bistro | Hot Springs, SD

A true "cow to cone" ice cream operation. The cows live right here in Hot Springs SD and the milk is brought to the creamery twice a week to make ice cream.



Google Maps

★★★★★ · Ice cream shop



Rankin Ridge Trail

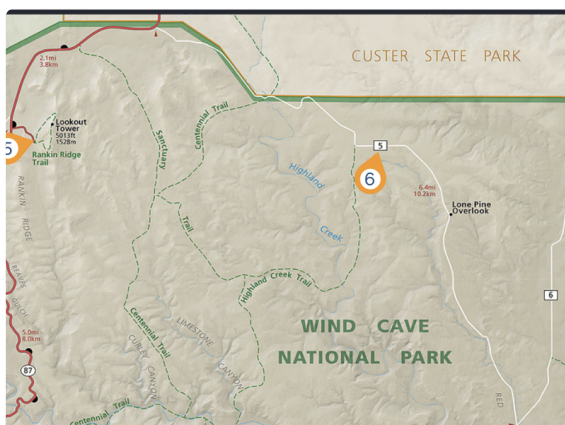
1 mi. RT

Rankin Ridge is a beautiful trail that takes you to the highest point in the park. From up here, you can see as far as Badlands on a clear day!

This is a loop trail that travels through the forest up to the vista. The fire tower at the top is closed, but the views of Wind Cave National Park from the ridge are gorgeous. After enjoying the view, you'll then loop back down into the forest back to the trailhead.

The Rankin Ridge Trail travels through prime buffalo habitat, so don't be surprised if you see them nearby – just be sure to give them space! Also, be on the lookout for the prairie dog towns you'll pass by as you drive to the trailhead.

From Hot Springs, drive north on Highway 385 for 12 miles to get back into Wind Cave National Park. Turn right onto Highway 87, following signs for Custer State Park. Travel north on Highway 87 for 5 miles until you see the right turn for the Rankin Ridge Trailhead. Turn here, and follow this side road for 0.3 miles until it dead-ends at the trailhead.



NPS 5 & 6 Backcountry Roads

The NPS 5 & 6 roads are my favorite way to find spectacular views, lots of wildlife, and solitude in Wind Cave National Park. These roads connect the northern part of Wind Cave to the southern part of Custer State Park, and most people don't even know they're here!

NPS 5 & 6 are gravel, but well-maintained roads. Passenger cars are usually fine out here, but I wouldn't attempt this drive if the weather is bad and the roads are muddy.

You'll drive on NPS 5 until it intersects with NPS 6. I've had the best luck seeing wildlife on NPS 6 as it travels north to Custer State Park – there are usually a ton of buffalo back here. NPS 6 takes you straight into Custer State Park near the Bison Center and Corrals. Take your time and enjoy the scenery as you drive through this quiet area of the park.

(alternative) If you don't want to drive on the dirt roads, you can just continue north into Custer State Park on Highway 87. This road is paved the whole way and still connects Wind Cave with Custer State Park.

From Rankin Ridge, head back out to Highway 87 and take a right. Drive for 2.1 miles until you see the sign for NPS 5. Turn right here and follow NPS 5 for 6.4 miles. When this road intersects with another major dirt road on your left, you'll want to turn here. This is NPS 6. If you miss this turn, you'll stay on NPS 5 and keep driving south, further from Custer State Park, so be sure to make this turn. When you get onto NPS 6, drive for 3.7 miles until you enter Custer State Park.



Wildlife Loop Road

it is a great place to see buffalo, pronghorn, and burros. You'll also find several beautiful lodges with nice restaurants and souvenir shops as you drive the loop.



Check in at Budget Host Badlands Motel Interior



Budget Host Badlands Motel Interior

900 SD Highway 377, Interior, SD, US, 57750

July 5 - Friday - Badlands



Badlands Hikes



Google Maps



HIKE: The Notch Trail

1.5 mi

The Notch Trail is the most popular (and exciting) trail in Badlands National Park! You'll travel through a small canyon and up a dramatic ladder onto the cliffs before ending at the Notch, a saddle between two badlands. If you only hike one trail in Badlands today, make it this one!

The Notch Trail is fine for hikers of all ages, but the wooden ladder can be daunting. I recommend at least starting the trail, even if you have small children in your group or if you have a fear of heights. Photos of this ladder make it look much scarier than it actually is – you'll need to help your little ones up and down, but the slope of the hill is mild until the final few rungs.

The parking area at the Notch Trail is large, but it does stay busy throughout the day. The earlier you can get here, the better! This trail bottlenecks at the ladder because you have to wait for big groups of people to go up and down. Starting your hike before it gets too crowded makes for a much better experience.

This trail gets treacherous and slippery when the ground is wet, so you'll want to hike the Notch when the ground is dry! Afternoon rainstorms are common in this park during the summer, making the morning hours the ideal time to be out here.

This parking lot is large and will be on your left. The Notch Trail starts at the south end of the lot



HIKE: The Window Trail

.25 mi

After completing the Notch Trail, you'll see a short boardwalk near the parking lot that leads out to the Window. Take a few minutes to walk down this boardwalk to the deadend, where you'll find a beautiful view of the nearby badlands formations.

Leave your car parked in the large Notch/Window/Door parking lot. As you exit the Notch Trail, you'll find the Window Trail along the boardwalk on your right.



HIKE: The Door Trail

.75 mi

If you are looking for a fun, short, and adventurous trail that is perfect for the whole family, head over to the Door Trail! This trail begins as a boardwalk that takes you to a nice view of the Badlands.

After admiring the view, the real adventure begins as you step off the boardwalk and onto the dirt. At this point, you'll follow markers through the formations as you soak in the views. This trail is especially perfect for kids who like to explore – it's like a treasure hunt as they try to find the next marker.

You'll often see bighorn sheep in this area during the morning hours, so keep your eyes peeled! Also, be on the lookout for rattlesnakes as you hike – they are common in this park.

Leave your car parked in the large Notch/Window/Door parking lot. Walk to the northern end of the parking lot (past the restrooms) and follow the signs to the Door Trailhead.



HIKE: Cliff Shelf Trail

.5 mi

The Cliff Shelf Trail travels through a juniper forest at the base of some beautiful badland formations. Hiking among trees is a unique experience in this park, and it's nice to add some greenery to the view! This trail is a combination of boardwalks, stairs, and gravel paths and has benches along the way.

From the Fossil Preparation Lab, turn right onto Highway 240 (Badlands Loop Road) and drive for 0.5 miles until you see the Cliff Shelf Trailhead on your right.



Fossil Preparation Lab

Badlands National Park is a hot spot for fossils! The Big Pig Dig was a massive excavation near the Conata Picnic Area that took 15 seasons to complete and resulted in over 19,000 fossils being uncovered. Paleontologists have uncovered many different kinds of fossils all over the park, including mosasaur, saber-toothed cat, and thunder beast bones!

A visit to the Fossil Preparation Lab provides a great opportunity to watch paleontologists at work while you're in Badlands. You can peek in as they identify, clean up, and prepare fossils that have been discovered in the park. You can also ask the paleontologists questions as they work.

The Fossil Preparation Lab is usually open seven days a week from 9-4:30 during the main summer season. You'll want to watch the clock this afternoon and aim to be here around 4:00 to give yourself enough time to observe before they close at 4:30.



HIKE: Fossil Exhibit Trail

.25 mi

This short and flat boardwalk trail is all about the fossils of Badlands National Park. You'll find interpretive signs about the geology of the area, the creatures that lived here, and the fossils that have been found around the park. There are even fossil replicas you can touch!

From the Saddle Pass Trail, turn right onto Highway 240 (Badlands Loop Road) and drive for 3 miles until you see the Fossil Exhibit Trailhead on your left.



Evening Drive



Google Maps



Sage Creek Rim Road

Most visitors to Badlands stick to the paved park loop road, so driving the Sage Creek Rim Road is a fabulous way to get off the beaten path and find some solitude!

The Sage Creek Rim Road is a well-maintained dirt road that travels to the Roberts Prairie Dog Town and a primitive campground before exiting the park. The views out here are understated but beautiful, and if you're hoping for a wildlife sighting while visiting Badlands, this is the place to be.

I recommend stopping at the Hay Butte Overlook, the Badlands Wilderness Overlook, the Roberts Prairie Dog Town, and the Sage Creek Basin Overlook. Turn around after enjoying the view at the Sage Creek Basin Overlook. There is no need to keep driving beyond that viewpoint unless you plan on camping or backpacking in this area.



Badlands Loop Road

The Badlands Loop Road is the main road through Badlands National Park, and you'll find several spectacular viewpoints that showcase the beauty of the area from this road. Roll down your windows and look for wildlife (bighorn sheep, buffalo, and prairie dogs are frequently spotted here) as you leisurely drive through the park this morning. Stop at any viewpoints that pique your interest!

I recommend, at the very least, getting out of your car at the White River Valley Overlook, Panorama Point, Burns Basin Overlook, Yellow Mounds, and Pinnacles Overlook. If you plan on staying in the park for golden hour and sunset (this is the absolute best time to be in Badlands), then you'll drive this road again later. Use this first drivethrough as an opportunity to scout out your favorite viewpoints so you know where to return to during the evening hours.

July 6 - Saturday- Head home

No Plans For This Day