

Bison Herds by Day, Granite Faces at Dusk

A 3-Day Black Hills & Badlands Road Trip

The Black Hills and Badlands in three days: a self-drive loop out of Rapid City into the Badlands' striped rock spires for a boardwalk hike and a sunset overlook, a day on Custer State Park's Wildlife Loop Road weaving through free-roaming bison herds and the Needles Highway's granite spires and one-lane tunnels, a filet mignon dinner at a cash-only Black Hills institution, and a final morning face to face with Mount Rushmore and the still-unfinished Crazy Horse Memorial — with real trailheads, roadside restaurants, and 2026 park fees for every stop.

DURATION

3 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

**May–June & September
(Shoulder Season)**

Highs sit in the 70s–80s°F (21–29°C) with far lighter traffic than the July–August Sturgis and peak-summer crowds, and Custer State Park's bison and burros are most active in the cooler morning and evening light.

FROM

\$480 USD / person

for 2 people, incl. rental car & gas, 2 nights' lodging & park entrance fees

Sunset — Pinnacles Overlook & Yellow Mounds

~45 minutes, self-guided · Included with park entrance

The Badlands Loop Road's Yellow Mounds Overlook catches an ancient, mineral-banded soil that glows gold and rose at sunset, a short drive from the layered spires at Pinnacles Overlook.

Overnight — Circle View Guest Ranch

From \$175 USD / night, for 2 people

A working fifth-generation cattle ranch turned bed-and-breakfast on a ridge overlooking the Badlands, with unobstructed sunset views from the porch and no other buildings in sight.

Circle View Guest Ranch · circleviewranch.com

Day 2

Custer State Park — Bison & Needles Highway

A full day in the Black Hills threads through free-roaming bison and burros on the Wildlife Loop Road, then climbs the granite spires and one-lane tunnels of the Needles Highway before a Black Hills institution's cash-only filet dinner.

Drive — Badlands to Custer State Park

~2 hours, 100 miles · self-drive via SD-44 & US-16A

A back-roads route across the southern Black Hills swaps the Badlands' bare rock for pine forest and open grassland on the approach to Custer State Park's eastern entrance.

Wildlife Loop Road

~1.5 hours, self-drive · Included with park entrance (\$20 USD/vehicle, 7-day license)

An 18-mile paved loop through open grassland carries one of the largest publicly held bison herds in the country, along with pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and the park's famously food-motivated "begging burros," descendants of a long-retired stagecoach concession.

Needles Highway

~1.5 hours, self-drive · Included with park entrance

A 14-mile scenic drive twists between granite spires named for their needle-like shape, through two single-lane tunnels barely wider than a car, with a pull-off at the Needle's Eye formation worth the stop.

Sylvan Lake

~45 minutes round-trip, self-guided · Included with park entrance

A flat, mile-long shoreline trail circles a granite-ringed lake that doubled as a filming location for National Lampoon's Vacation, with a swimming beach and canoe rentals at the boathouse.

Dinner — Alpine Inn, Hill City

~1 hour · \$20–\$26 USD / person, cash only

A Black Hills institution serving exactly one main course — a filet mignon in three sizes, with a baked potato, salad, and garlic toast — at prices that haven't chased its reputation; expect a line before the 5pm opening.

Alpine Inn · alpineinnhillcity.com

Overnight — State Game Lodge

Custer State Park's original 1920s lodge, where President Calvin Coolidge ran the country for three months in 1927 from what press at the time dubbed the "Summer White House."

State Game Lodge · custerresorts.com

Day 3

Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse & Departure

A final morning brings two monumental mountain carvings face to face — one finished in 1941, one still being blasted from the rock today — before the drive back to Rapid City.

Mount Rushmore National Memorial

~1.5 hours, self-guided · Free entry (\$10 USD parking)

The half-mile Presidential Trail loops beneath the 60-foot carved faces of Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln for the closest legal vantage point, finished by sculptor Gutzon Borglum's crew in 1941 after 14 years of carving.

Crazy Horse Memorial

~1.5 hours, self-guided · \$30 USD per carload

A mountain carving of the Lakota leader Crazy Horse, in progress since 1948 and still decades from completion, includes an Indigenous North American cultural center and museum at its base.

Crazy Horse Memorial · crazyhorsememorial.org

Drive — Return to Rapid City

~45 minutes, 30 miles · self-drive via US-16

US-16 retraces the route back through Keystone and Rockerville to Rapid City Regional Airport, closing a three-day loop through the Black Hills and Badlands.

Departure — Rapid City Regional Airport (RAP)

Self-guided

Three days that ran from the Badlands' striped rock spires and free-roaming bison herds to granite faces carved a century apart at Mount Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Memorial.