



# Custer Trail Auto Tour



## Explore the Custer Trail Auto Tour

### Discover History in the Hills

Between 1864 and 1876, when tensions were high between Native Americans and newcomers to the badlands, five military expeditions crossed this windswept country. Though only a couple of skirmishes occurred here, this route holds a significant place in the history of the Great Sioux War. As you drive the Custer Trail Auto Tour, enjoy the rugged beauty of the landscape and take time to reflect on the rich history hidden in these hills.

**Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer** is only a small part of this story. He accompanied two of the five badlands expeditions (1873 and 1876) but wasn't the highest ranking officer with either. However, his controversial exploits and death at the Battle of Little Bighorn gave Custer a more enduring place in history than many officers of his time—hence the name of this tour.

**Today's roads don't align precisely with yesterday's trails**, so the tour winds through the hills intersecting the historic routes at interpretive sites. As you discover the badlands in safety and comfort, imagine the experience of troops who traversed this rugged route in the late 1800s, exposed to the elements, ever-alert for danger. It's their stories we'll tell along the way.

### Following This Rugged Route

The Custer Trail Auto Tour is located in the Little Missouri National Grassland. Researchers, using military records and maps, letters and journals, and archeological surveys, have attempted to locate travel routes and significant sites pertaining to the five military expeditions.



**The Auto Tour is divided into two segments** that provide access to portions of Sully's Battle of the Badlands Trail and the Custer Historic Trail. The entire tour (approximately 80 miles) can be driven in a single day, but plan on taking 2-3 days, spending a night in Medora or a nearby campground, and visiting Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

**It's easy to get lost in the badlands**, so watch for directional signs that'll keep you on track. Many roads that intersect the route are not shown on this map. Some of these are private roads associated with oil and gas facilities.

### Protecting the Past

*Wagon ruts, Native American or military sites and artifacts, the names on Initial Rock—all are valuable threads in the historical fabric of the badlands. They are protected by law. It is illegal to collect artifacts or damage historic sites on public land.*

*Help the Forest Service protect our heritage. Respect these sites and report vandalism to the Little Missouri National Grassland office in Dickinson, 701-227-7800.*

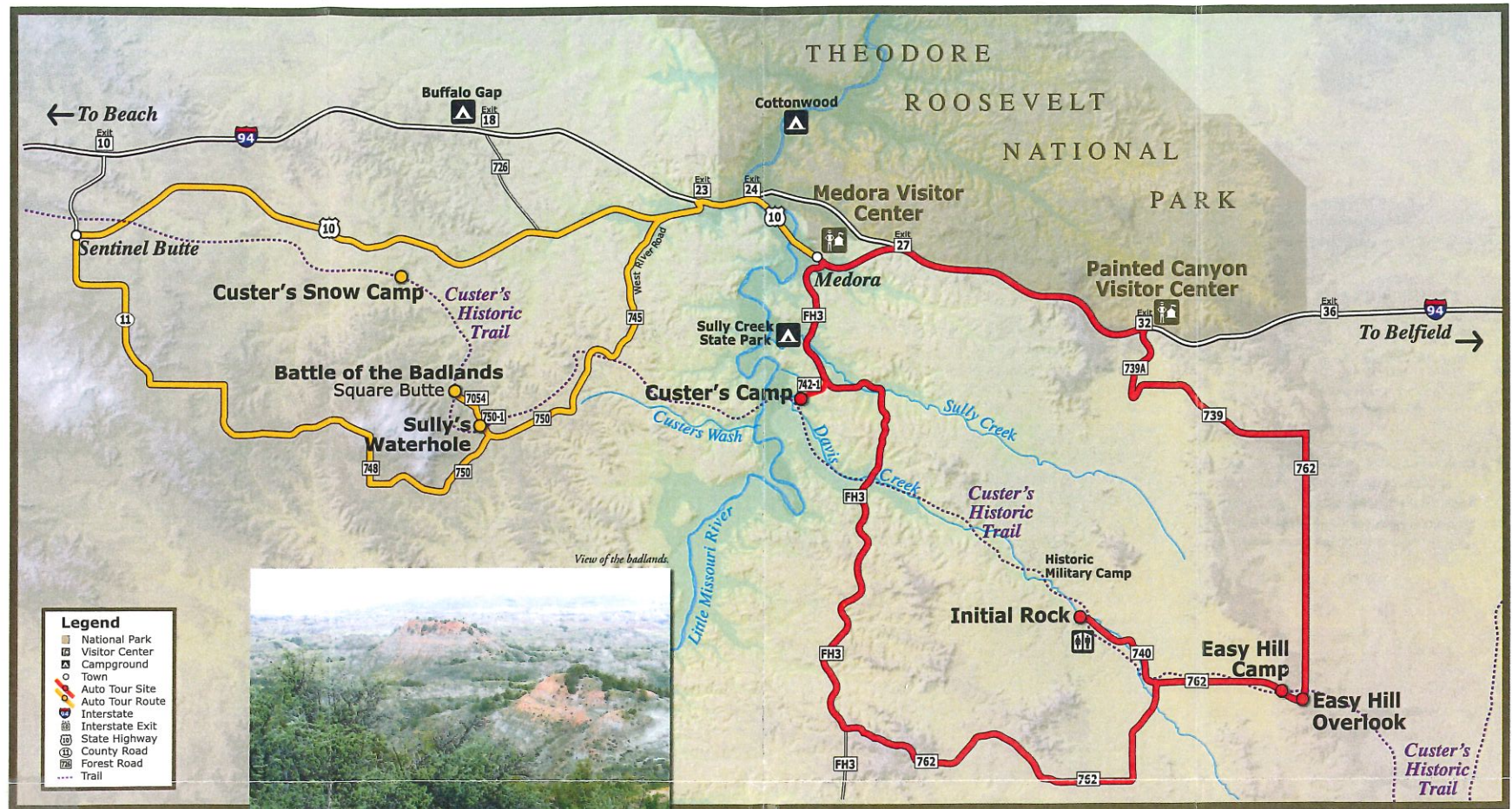
Experience  
a Bit of the  
Badlands







# The Custer Trail Auto Tour





The eastern portion of the route, beginning at Painted Canyon Overlook on I-94, includes interpretive sites at Easy Hill Overlook, Easy Hill Camp, and Initial Rock, and a scenic drive from Initial Rock to Medora. The eastern route is accessible via well-maintained, all-weather gravel roads.

- From Painted Canyon Overlook, turn south on Forest Road (FR) 739A to FR 739, then turn south on FR 762 to Easy Hill and Easy Hill Campsite.
- Continue west on FR 762 to FR 740 to Initial Rock.
- Backtrack on FR 740 to FR 762 and follow it to its junction with FH3.
- Take a brief side trip on FR 742-1 from FH3 to the Bully Pulpit Golf Course, location of another military campsite.
- Continue north on FH3 about 3 miles to Medora.



### Easy Hill Overlook

In 1876, Custer scanned the horizon in search of Square Butte and other landmarks that would identify the route he followed with Stanley and the 1873 survey expedition. Climb the hill to enjoy a spectacular but daunting view of the badlands.

### Easy Hill Camp

Travel in such rugged country with hundreds of troops on foot and on horseback, wagons filled with weapons, ammunition and supplies, and herds of livestock was a logistical nightmare. Finding a good campsite was no easy task. In 1876, the military band entertained the troops from a nearby butte while they set up camp. It is believed that earlier expeditions used this site as well.



### Initial Rock

On May 28, 1876, records indicate that 7th Cavalry privates Frank Neely and William C. Williams were assigned to rear guard duty. In the absence of the Sioux they were pursuing, perhaps they found themselves with time on their hands and decided to fill it by carving their names in a sandstone bluff. To this day, their names remain in silent testimony to their passing.

### Custer's Camp (at Bully Pulpit Golf Course)

This campsite's prime location near the Little Missouri River makes it likely that all five expeditions stopped here. Trail-weary, hot and dusty, this was the first time in days the men had enough water to bathe, wash clothes, and even do a little fishing. In 1876, the expedition took a layover day here to enjoy the luxury!

The western portion of the route includes Sully's Waterhole, the Battle of the Badlands site at Square Butte, Custer's Snow Camp, and a scenic segment from Square Butte to Medora via Sentinel Butte. The western route follows well-maintained, all-weather gravel roads and a paved county road between Sentinel Butte and Medora.

- From Medora, travel west on State Highway 10 to I-94 (exit 24). Travel west on I-94 one mile to exit 23, West River Road. Travel south on State Highway 10 to West River Road (FR 745), then FR 750. Turn northwest on FR 750-1 to Sully's Waterhole and continue on FR 7054 to the Battle of the Badlands site near Square Butte.
- Backtrack to Medora, or take the scenic drive on FR 750, FR 748, and County Road 11 to Sentinel Butte.
- From Sentinel Butte, take State Highway 10 back to Medora.
- Visiting Custer's Snow Camp requires a two-mile cross-country hike.



### Custer's Snow Camp

Arctic cold and high winds can sweep across the Northern Plains without warning almost any time of year. The 1876 expedition arrived at Snow Camp on May 31st and found themselves snowed in here for two more nights. While the officers were nestled in their wall tents with warming stoves, the enlisted men huddled under ponchos around campfires or shivered in their wet three-man pup tents.



### Sully's Waterhole

Water is a scarce commodity in the badlands and there's little doubt that Sully's troops were desperate to fill their canteens. Sioux marksmen targeted Sully's troops as they tried to get water from a muddy little water hole.

**WARNING:** Do not walk beyond the parking area. Hydrogen sulfide gas, a toxic byproduct from a near-by oil production facility, may accumulate in the "bowl" below the roadway.

### Battle of the Badlands/Square Butte

Sully is less well-known than Custer, but as leader of some of the first campaigns in the Sioux Wars he holds a significant place in our nation's history. The 1864 Battle of the Badlands, a running battle between Sully's troops and the Sioux, took place at Square Butte. This battle and the skirmish at Sully's Water Hole were the only battles known to have occurred in the area commemorated by this Auto Tour.



View of Square Butte.





**D**uring the late 1800s, gold rushes and railroads brought miners, traders, and homesteaders to the West, pushing Northern Plains tribes into ever smaller remnants of their former homelands. Treaties between the government and resident tribes were made and broken. Unscrupulous government agents and traders often cheated or mistreated Indians. The Sioux and other tribes responded with increasingly militant attempts to defend their homes and cultures.

Throughout Custer Trail Auto Tour interpretation, the name "Sioux" refers to several bands who fought together during the Great Sioux War, including Hunkpapa, Yanktonai, and Santee. They were joined at times by a few Northern Cheyenne and members of other tribes.

### Sibley, Sully and the Sioux

For the Santee Sioux, tensions peaked in August, 1862, and the resulting uprising in Minnesota Territory left 450-800 settlers and soldiers dead.

Governor Alexander Ramsey sent Brigadier General Henry Sibley with 1,400 soldiers to suppress the uprising. Many Santee were captured, some fled west to join other Sioux bands.

The military, led by Sibley and Brig. Gen. Alfred Sully pursued the Santee into Dakota Territory where Sibley fought several battles in July and August 1863.

In September, Sully's attack on a Sioux village at Whitestone Hill resulted in more Indian deaths than any other conflict on the Northern Plains.



## GOLD RUSHES, HOMESTEADS & RAILROADS

### Setting the stage for cultural conflict

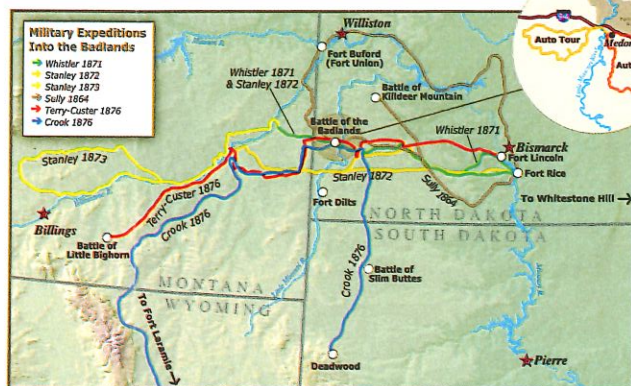


### Sully's Campaign, Battle of the Badlands, 1864

In June 1864, another expedition under the command of Sully left Fort Rice, Dakota Territory, to further punish the Sioux and establish military posts in the region. This was the first military expedition to traverse the badlands.

Sully's detachment engaged the Sioux at Killdeer Mountain on July 28, then followed what is now called Sully Creek to the Little Missouri River. They fought the Sioux again in a three day running battle called the Battle of the Badlands on August 7-9, 1864, near Square Butte.

Sully's column included 2,200 soldiers (cavalry, mounted infantry, and artillerymen), 70 white and Indian scouts, 400 freight wagons, and a cattle herd. They were accompanied by two civilian wagon trains of settlers bound for Montana and Idaho gold fields.



### Northern Pacific Railroad Surveys, 1871-1873

In 1864, Northern Pacific Railroad promoted a plan to link the Great Lakes and Puget Sound by rail. The Sioux, having witnessed the decimation of bison herds brought by railroads farther south, were determined to prevent construction of rail lines west of the Missouri River. Their attacks made military protection of railroad survey parties necessary.

Major Joseph Whistler accompanied Northern Pacific Railroad surveyors on their 1871 reconnaissance to locate the best route across northern Dakota Territory into Montana Territory. This expedition is thought to have followed Davis Creek to its confluence with the Little Missouri River.

In 1872, Colonel David Stanley's 600 infantry accompanied a survey party which attempted to avoid the badlands by traveling about 25 miles south of Whistler's route. The southerly route was even worse than the 1871 route, so they returned east via Davis Creek.

In 1873, Stanley's force of almost 2,000 men (including Custer's 7th Cavalry), 275 wagons, and a cattle herd escorted a third survey party on Whistler's 1871 route west from Ft. Abraham Lincoln into South Dakota's Black Hills.

### Terry and Custer's Campaign, 1876

Ignoring an 1868 treaty, the U.S. government attempted to get the Lakota Sioux to cede the Black Hills (South Dakota) to gold seekers who were pouring into the area. The Sioux were told to report to their Indian agencies by January 1876 or be considered "hostile." When the order was ignored, the government sent the military to enforce it.

In May, Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry headed west from Ft. Abraham Lincoln with 1,018 officers and enlisted men, 45 Indian scouts and interpreters, and 190 civilian employees as well as a wagon train, pack train, spare horses, a cattle herd, and a heavy weapons platoon. The detachment included most of Custer's 7th Cavalry.

They entered the badlands on May 27 near Easy Hill, continued down Davis Creek, and ascended "Custer's Wash" before reaching the uplands above the Little Missouri River at Snow Camp. From this point they continued west into Montana toward the Battle of the Little Bighorn where Custer and most of his men died.

Brigadier General George Crook was also sent to Montana that summer in pursuit of the Lakota Sioux who refused to go to the reservation. From there, his unit traveled east through the North Dakota badlands, then to South Dakota where they engaged the Sioux in the Battle of Slim Buttes.



William H. Illingworth, 1874 Black Hills Expedition, courtesy of State Historical Society of North Dakota.