

Alamosa

ROOTED IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

SOUTHERN COLORADO

TRAIL GUIDE

San Luis Valley, CO

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WELCOME

TO THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

Whether you are looking for a challenging alpine adventure or a casual hike with beautiful Colorado scenery, we've compiled 17 of our favorite San Luis Valley Trails. Plus, we've provided insider tips, so you can hike like a local!

Whichever hike you choose, you are sure to find adventure and create lasting memories. After your hike, stop by the Colorado Welcome Center in Alamosa or visit us at alamosa.org for advice on how to make the most of your stay with us. We can direct you to one of our local restaurants, let you know the best fishing spots, and share with you the rich cultural history of our area.

Stay with us a while! Experience the thrill of sand boarding down a 750-foot dune. Marvel in the splendor of Zapata Falls. Enjoy the serenity of soaking in a geothermal hot spring. Feel the warmth of small-town hospitality. Discover what it means to truly get rooted in the San Luis Valley.

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HIGH DUNE TRAIL

LENGTH:
2.5 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Medium to
Moderate

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, at the junction of Highways 17 and 160. North on 17 for 13.1 miles, turn right (East) at the sign for Great Sand Dunes, 16 miles straight to junction of CO 150, left (North) to Park. OR, take Hwy 160 East 15 miles to sign for Great Sand Dunes. Turn left on CO 150 for 20 miles to Park. (This route takes you by historical markers for Zebulon Pike's expedition in 1807 as well as the turnoff for Zapata Falls road).

Trailhead Parking Main Dune Parking Lot - 1/2 mile past Visitors Center. Left turn down road to parking lot. Overflow parking is along road.

Terrain If Medano Creek is flowing, there will be wet sand and stream water from several inches to over 12" deep with surge flow. After crossing the creek bottom, the terrain is all sand on varying degrees of slope. In winter, the hike could include snow.

Seasons Great Sand Dunes National Park is open 365 days a year. Heavy winds or thunderstorms are the only limiting factors.

Water/Bathrooms Water is available at the Visitors Center store. Food is available at the Sand Dunes Oasis. Bathrooms are at the Visitors Center and the Main Dune Parking Lot. Check for seasonal hours. HINT - Bring your own water and food as a backup.

Pleasures and Perils Hiking and playing on the dunes is a wonderful experience. Views across the dune fields and into the high mountains over 13,000 feet (4,000 meters), often snowcapped, are a unique experience like nothing else in the US. It is a day at the beach and a day in the mountains! Skiing, sand boarding, using saucers, and running down the steeper slopes are all part of dune fun. Sandboards can be rented from Kristi Mountain Sports, Sand Dunes Recreation or the Sand Dunes Oasis. The dunes are shaped by wind, which can be strong and cause discomfort to exposed skin, eyes, nose, and face. On sunny days, the sand surface temperatures can reach over 140 degrees and burn bare feet. Sand will get into shoes and everything else you may be wearing. Protect cameras, phones, and anything that sand can damage.

Significance These are the highest dunes in North America.

The dunes are a scientific wonder for weather, geology, biology, and history. There are species of animals that live nowhere else. From watching the surge flow in Medano Creek, to watching sand grains blow across the surface and constantly erase footprints, the dunes provide both a playroom and a classroom.

Trail Notes When Medano Creek is running, expect wet feet. Bring towels and dry shoes and socks. In May through September, if hiking in the mornings, the sun will heat up the sand. Wear shoes to avoid burning feet. If feet are burning, dig into sand below hot surface temperatures to cool off skin and try walking on shadier side of dunes if possible. There is a fee to enter into the Great Sand Dunes National Park. Pets are allowed. Remember, if the sand is hot for your feet, it is for your dog's paws too!



@karolinamarie

MOSCA PASS TRAIL

LENGTH:
7 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate



Driving Instructions From Alamosa, there are two ways. Go north on Hwy 17, 13 miles from junction of 160/17. Take right/east for 14 miles to junction of CO 150 and left/north to Sand Dunes 5 miles. OR, go east on 160 for 15 miles to turnoff for Sand Dunes. Going this way, you will pass Zapata Falls Road and you can combine both the Great Sand Dunes and Zapata Falls in single day trip. Trail open April through November, depending on snow.

Trailhead Parking 200 yards past the Great Sand Dunes Visitor Center on right (overflow parking at the Visitor Center).

Elevations 8229 feet to 9747 feet (1,518 gain in 3.5 miles - most in the 1st 1.5 miles)

Description The trail begins in an aspen/pine forest along Mosca Creek. It's cool and dark in the morning. It is a steep and slightly rough trail to begin, then levels out and becomes a trail in and out of meadows. There are views of the valley floor, but the Great Sand Dunes are mostly hidden by a mountainside to the North. Bighorn sheep, deer and elk are occasionally seen along the trail. You can view the Wet Mountain Valley to the east from the top. There is a gravel road that drops into the valley and the top of Mosca Pass and can be driven from the east side. Occasionally in winter there are deep snow drifts due to prevailing winds that flow west to east that also shape the Sand Dunes!

Terrain Rocky, tree roots, dirt and gravel. Easy footing. From April to June there could be ice and snowpack on trail making for somewhat slick or postholing footing on the lower section, along the creek in the shady portions of the trail. (Postholing is a term for walking on snow but when snow softens, falling through from shin deep to thigh deep.)

Water/Bathrooms Water and bathrooms are available at the Visitor Center store.

Pleasures and Perils If a day at the Sand Dunes is too hot or windy, this is a good alternative trail. It can be windy at the top and wind chill can make it much cooler at nearly 10,000 feet. Dress in layers.

Significance Mosca Pass was a Native American footpath for the Ute Indians over the lowest point of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Westward expansion in the 1860s included miners, ranchers, and homesteaders looking for a place to live in the San Luis Valley which was now US territory (though Colorado was not a state until 1876). Mosca Pass became a toll road starting in 1871, through 1911, for many settlers and freight wagons, until a flash flood destroyed the road on the Great Sand Dunes side. On the lower mile and a half, it is hard to imagine the road being there, but the top 2 miles of the trail is the former toll road.

Notes There is a fee to enter into the Great Sand Dunes National Park. Pets on leashes are allowed. Jim Ryun, one of America's greatest runners, trained here for altitude acclimation to help him set several world records including winning a silver medal in Mexico City in the 1500 meters in 1968.

ZAPATA FALLS TRAIL

LENGTH:
0.8 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Easy to
Medium

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive US 160 East for 15 miles and see the signs for Great Sand Dunes National Park. Take a left turn and drive north for 10.5 miles on Colorado 150. The sign and road for Zapata Falls will be on your right. The road is a rough gravel surface and steep for 3 miles to the parking lot. Passenger cars are fine, as there is no problem with clearance. It is a 'vehicle shaker' with lots of bumps in the road, so plan on extra time and slow speeds. However, it is well worth the trip.

Trailhead Parking This is a free hike and parking lot. Parking is limited and can be busy on weekends and afternoons. Overflow parking is available on the road. Pets on leash allowed.

Elevations 9,000 to 9200 feet.

Description Zapata Falls is a 25 foot waterfall tucked away inside a cave. The parking lot is a thousand feet off the valley floor and offers full views of the San Luis Valley and a great view North to the Great Sand Dunes National Park and the high mountains above them in the Sangre de Cristo Range. The hike to get there is an easy stroll on a gravel trail, through a variety of tree species. To get into the cave requires walking through the creek. WEAR SHOES THAT CAN GET WET. The water is snowmelt and is cold. Though perhaps sunny and warm outside the cave, it can be quite cool near the falls, as the cave is out of the reach of the sun.

Terrain Rocky trail with high desert vegetation mixed with forest especially near the creek. Hiking on wet rocks in the creek the last 75 yards to see the falls is required and can be difficult footing at times, especially during spring runoff or heavy rain during summer thunderstorms.

Water/Bathrooms Bathrooms are available at the parking lot. Water along trail with proper filter or treatments.

Pleasures and Perils This is a unique geologic wonder of how mountain stream water has for thousands of years carved a deep vertical gorge to reach the valley floor. It combines a waterfall, caving, great mountain and valley views with Sand Dunes in the near distance. Footing in the creek to reach the falls can be slippery and difficult to negotiate for some people. Water is cold and can cause cold feet and hypothermia. Have dry clothes and additional dry socks and shoes in your vehicle. Occasionally, the road may require 4 wheel drive in deep snow but the road faces west and usually dries out in several days.

Significance Zebulon Pike and his exploring team camped near South Zapata Creek where it flows into the San Luis Valley in January 1807. The waterfall is a geologic wonder. The water from the creek never joins another stream as it disappears underground when it reaches the valley.

Notes This short hike can be combined with the South Zapata Lake Trail, which is a nearly 10 mile round trip steep trail. Prepare accordingly as this is a day long hike. There is also a campground near the trailhead.



@ellybellie3

NORTH CRESTONE TRAIL

LENGTH:
7 to 11.4 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate to
Difficult

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive 37 miles North on Highway 17 to Moffat and 13 miles east to Crestone on County Road T. At the junction in Crestone take the left onto CR 71, which becomes Golden. Take to S. Alder and then take left on Alder (north) through town and turn right on Mica for 1 block east. In a block Mica will turn north and become CR 71 officially out of town. Follow for 2 miles uphill. It will turn to gravel. Go past 12 campsites on right and road will end at trailhead.

Trailhead Parking There is usually always parking. It may be busy on weekends and holidays. Free. Pets are allowed on leash. This trail is open June through October, but may be open much later depending on snowfall. It is a good trail for snowshoeing in winter.

Elevations 8,610 feet at trailhead and 11,840 feet at North Crestone Lake. 3,230 feet elevation gain one way.

Description The trail goes through forests of pine and aspen trees along the creek. Its a long steady grade uphill, but minimal switchbacks. Several trails come off of this trail and interconnect with others. It offers scenic views without crowds and provides deep access into the mountain valleys of the Sangre de Cristos. This trail is beautiful in the fall with changing aspens.

Terrain It goes from dirt, to gravel and rocks but is well maintained. A few small streams cut across trail.

Water/Bathrooms In town of Crestone. Bathrooms at Campground. Water along trail with proper filter or treatments.

Pleasures and Perils This is a low use trail as there is no access to 14ers. Good solitude. Steady grade along the beautiful creek makes for easy hiking. Once elevation is gained, big views back into valley or up to the geologic wonders of the higher peaks above treeline. High elevations can make it tough for breathing. Be prepared in summer for changing weather and thunderstorms. Hot and sunny at trailhead can yield cool to almost cold temperatures 3 thousand feet higher.

Significance Because this valley gets low usage and has never had mining activities, it is quite pristine and represents the best of what the Sangre de Cristos have to offer. A great area for wilderness backpacking experiences.

Notes The layout of the valleys up this creek make it difficult to get lost as the mountains are very steep and all the small creeks funnel into North Crestone Creek.



ORIENT LAND TRUST TRAIL

LENGTH:
4 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Easy to
Medium

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive 51 miles North on Highway 17, just beyond Joyful Journey Hot Springs. Stay right and merge onto County Road GG (don't turn on to 285). The road becomes gravel and turns to the East toward the mountains. After 6 miles when the road forks, take the left fork and head to the office parking lot for Valley View Hot Springs/Orient Land Trust.

Trailhead Parking Park in the office parking lot and ask in the office the best place to park for the trail that day. Valley View Hot Springs is sometimes very busy. Passes are required to go through the gate. No fee to hike. Pets are allowed on leash.



Elevations 8,900 to 9,300 feet at the mine.

Description The trail follows the road through the rental cabins and facilities at Valley View Hot Springs. Views extend into the North end of the San Luis Valley across to the San Juans 60 miles to the west. The gravel road is a steady uphill grade that will turn into a steep creek valley. Don't miss the sign for the left turn off the road to continue to the mine. The trail flattens out as you approach the mine. Security fences protect the deep drop-offs. Keep children and dogs close. Trail faces west and can occasionally be snowy and icy but the sun clears the trail fairly quickly except after cold winter storms.

Terrain The road is rocky and steep in several places. There are steep hillsides toward the top of trail.

Water/Bathrooms Both are available at the office. A bathroom outhouse is available at the 1/2 mile mark up the trail.

Pleasures and Perils This is a historical hike, wildlife hike and scenic hike! There are great views of the surrounding mountains above the valley. The trail is steep in places. There are old mining structures still in place and should be left alone. There is no cover available from thunderstorms.

Significance The mine produced iron ore from 1880-1931. The ore was hauled by train to Pueblo Colorado and the processing plants are still there. The town of Orient served the miners and had an interesting history. Up to 250,000 male bats from a colony in Carlsbad Caverns New Mexico spend the months of June through September feeding at night on the insects in the valley. They have become important to the agriculture of the valley for controlling the insect population.

Notes Valley View Hot Springs is a clothing optional facility and visitors may encounter these hikers on the trail. The hot springs are unique as they flow out of the mountains above. They create soaking pools, supply the facility with water, and flow down the mountain to create the electricity and heat for the whole complex. It is the most sustainable village in Colorado. There are guided bat hikes during the summer. Orient Land Trust is closed in the month of December.

ALAMOSA WILDLIFE REFUGE TRAIL

LENGTH:
3.75 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Easy

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, at the junction of US 160 and CO Highway 17 on east end of town, drive 2.8 miles east on US 160 until you see the sign for the Alamosa Wildlife Refuge. Turn right (south) on El Rancho Lane and drive 2.5 miles south to Visitor Center. Once you cross the railroad tracks, the road turns to gravel and the refuge is on both sides of the road.

Trailhead Parking Parking is freestyle in the gravel parking lot behind the Visitors Center. The sign for the Nature Trail is there and near the 3.5 mile driving loop. Hikers and bikers are allowed on the driving loop. FREE parking. Pets allowed on leash only.

Terrain The wide trail is a combination of soft sand and dirt. It is flat open country with cottonwood trees and high brush in places.

Description The trail follows the Rio Grande as it turns south toward New Mexico. It also follows a human made canal used to recharge the wetlands and control outflows of the river. Unobstructed views of Mount Blanca across the historical and natural wetlands home to numerous aquatic plants and animals. The bird species change with annual migration patterns.

Significance Thousands of acres of wetlands used to occupy the San Luis Valley. Fortunately, this one, and other wildlife refuges were established to provide natural habitat for native species and maintain the health of the waters flowing through the valley.

Elevations 7,536 feet downriver to 7,518 feet. Trail is basically flat.

Pleasures and Perils The waters in the Rio in this part of the San Luis Valley flow peacefully downstream in 'old river' meandering. The almost natural wetlands have been here for thousands of years and look the same as the Ute and Navajo Indians saw them. Along with great mountain views, the wetlands are a host to numerous species of plants, mammals, birds and amphibians, which make up the unique wetland ecosystem. There is no cover if storms blow across the Valley. Caravans of coyotes patrol the trail at night on their hunting expeditions. Much of the dried scat along the trail is from coyotes, not dogs. They usually make themselves scarce during daylight hours, but one more reason to keep all dogs on leashes.

Notes For an understanding of the valley, read the history of how the mountains and the valley work together to create these special places. Information is available at the Colorado Welcome Center in Alamosa or at the Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center.

@arOnLtor35



@zacheiten



RIO GRANDE TRAIL

LENGTH:
3.2 to 4.5 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Easy



Driving Instructions From Alamosa, take State Street 3/4 mile North from Main Street to the bridge, cross over and gravel parking lot is on left.

Trailhead Location The best location to start trails over the State Street Bridge at the parking lot immediately on left (West side). There are no fees. Dogs on leashes are allowed.

Elevations 7,586 to 7,619 feet - These trails are basically flat as they are in the valley near the river.

Description The Rio Grande Trail is an out-and-back along the river and the Cattails Golf Course. To the gate is 1.6 miles and making the roundtrip 3.2 (a 5K). Adding the Sierra Blanca Loop over the bridge along the river to the Cole Creek Foot Bridge and back to State Street Bridge, adds 1.3 miles for a total of 4.5. For Twin Peaks Loop, take the Rio Grande Trail to gate, take right along northern edge of golf course to country road, take right again to State Street and head South back to Parking Lot.

The trails are on the dikes that were built to contain the Rio Grande. Natural features exist in the river. The river used to flood and spread out during spring snowmelt. Hike, run, or bike on the easy and wide gravel trail. Great for families.

Terrain Gravel, some pavement on loops.

Water/Bathrooms Water and bathrooms are located at Cole Park. During golfing season, bathrooms on golf course can be accessed from trail 1/4 mile west of State Street Bridge.

Pleasures and Perils This trail is perfect to enjoy the distant mountain views and the gently flowing waters of the river. You may see deer, and a variety of birds and waterfowl - mostly ducks and Canada Geese. Near dusk, an occasional owl may be perched in the trees. Beaver also inhabit the river. The trails get occasional heavy use with dogs, bikers, groups of runners. Watch for golfers hitting stray shots along golf course. Careful crossing roads as there are no crosswalks.

Significance The Rio Grande is the life blood of this high desert valley. Alamosa is at mile marker 100 on the river's 1400 mile journey to the Gulf of Mexico. The Rio Grande flows through New Mexico and becomes the border of Texas and Mexico.

Notes Be sure to follow leash laws and be aware of other walker's dogs and wildlife in the area.

EMBARGO CREEK TRAIL

LENGTH:
11.8 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate to
Difficult

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive US 160 West to Del Norte. Continue on 160 toward South Fork 8.75 miles until you see the brown Forest Service sign for Embargo Creek Road and take a right. This is County Road (CR) 18. Drive across the Rio Grande and when the road Ts, take a right on CR 15 for about 1/3 of a mile. Take a left turn going northwest on CR 65 which is FS Road 650 for 3 miles. At the Y junction take CR 55 (which is also FS Road 640) left and continue for 7.6 miles until Cathedral Campground. Parking here is easier as the road for the next mile is a fairly rough road for passenger cars. There are several wide spots in the road to park. Free Parking. Pets okay. Open May to November snowpack permitting.

Trailhead Parking Cathedral Campground is not heavily used. Parking slightly off the campground road is fine. Put a note that you are day hiking and not camping. The road past Cathedral begins to get rough, although there are a few wide pullouts for parking. 4 wheel aficionados can continue toward dual trailheads.

Elevations 9,478 feet at Cathedral Campground to Fremont's Camp at 11,117 feet on trail 885.

Description Trail #885 goes 3.5 miles up a fairly steep road through scenic aspen and pines. There are good views into the San Luis Valley after 2 miles. There is a sizable hunting camp/ lodge building in a clearing. The trail goes through the camp. A sign points to Fremont's camp, though the actual spot from 1849 is hard to find. Artifacts of the expedition can be seen in Del Norte museum.

Terrain The trail goes through deep forest of pines and aspens intermingled. Steep rocky cliffs can be seen on either trail.

Water/Bathrooms Forest Service indicates water available at Cathedral Campground from Memorial Day through Labor Day. However, it's a good idea to have your own water or have a filter for creek water. Bathrooms are at Cathedral Campground.

Pleasures and Perils This area is remote and mostly unknown. Read about the history of Fremont's winter expedition of 1848-49 for background information and as you are on these trails think about what it would have been like in 6-8 feet of snow and having to eat frozen mules and eventually shoe leather to survive. This trail is great for those who appreciate historical references. Thunderstorms are frequent in San Juan summers. Dead beetle kill pines along trail or dead aspen (snags) can fall without warning especially on windy days.

Significance As mentioned, this was Fremont's bad judgement attempt to find a railroad route on the 38th parallel from St. Louis to San Francisco. He was warned by many a mountain man and Indian guide not to attempt the San Juans in winter. Fortunately, his group was rescued and the men on the expedition used the frozen Rio Grande as their highway back to safety in Taos, New Mexico.

Notes Some guidebooks make mention of stumps from trees that Fremont's men cut down for fires are still there and some apparently were there in the 1980s but it is unclear if evidence still remains today. You can go to Del Norte history museum to see clothing, mule harnesses, old bones, and other expeditionary 'things' for a view into western history.



OXBOW TRAILS SYSTEM

LENGTH:
0.47 to 1.1 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Easy



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Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive State Street North over the State Street Bridge (see Rio Grande Trail as trails can be accessed from here.) Or, continue past Cattails Golf Course for 8/10 of a mile on North River Road until it Ts. Take a left turn (west) for 4/10 of a mile and turn left on the gravel road until it dead ends in the parking lot where the frisbee golf course begins. To continue to the Simpson Loop, drive north on road for 4/10 of a mile and take the next left on the gravel road to the covered picnic table and parking lot.

Trailhead Parking These trails all interconnect and can be accessed from 3 parking lots. State Street Bridge lot is the closest to town. Frisbee Golf Course parking lot is another 1.6 miles and Simpson Loop trailhead is 1.9 miles from State Street Bridge. All trails are free. Dogs on a leash are allowed.

Water/Bathrooms No water. Bring your own. A Port-a-potty is available at Frisbee Course parking lot.

Elevation 7,600 feet.

Description Inner Oxbow Loop is .47 mile. Outer Oxbow Loop is .9 mile. Simpson Loop is 1 mile. Rio Inspire Trail is 1.1 mile. Many of the loops are connected with observation stops along the way. These trails provide access to the bosque (forested woodlands along a river) and also the wetlands. The Oxbow Trails are old bends in the river. Rivers change their course over time, through natural processes or human made changes with dikes and diversions. This section of the river has had minimal changes. These trails are on delicate ecosystems, so please stay on trails.

Terrain There are gravel and dirt trails along the river, through the cottonwood bosque and across wetland meadows. They vary from dry and dusty to wet and muddy.

Pleasures and Perils For the most part, this is the Rio Grande, its wetlands and bosque in their natural states. Wildlife sightings are common, especially birds and waterfowl. Part of the lands are also used for cattle grazing. It offers unobstructed mountain views, especially East to Mount Blanca and the Great Sand Dunes are visible. There is uneven ground and cottonwood trees eventually rot out and limbs and whole trees fall, hence all the wood clutter on the ground in the bosque. Rattlesnakes are rarely seen. Other wildlife may be around as well. Watch for golf balls along golf course and flying frisbees near frisbee course.

Significance The Rio Grande has another 1,300 miles to go to reach the Gulf of Mexico. You are seeing the clear headwaters of this river. Natural ecosystems along rivers are critical to the health of the surrounding communities as wetlands provide habitat, clean the water of human and livestock waste, restore groundwater and provide recreational opportunities.

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PENITENTE CANYON TRAIL

LENGTH:
*Variable-25 Miles
of Trail in Total*

DIFFICULTY:
*Variable Based
on Trail*

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive 15 miles west on Highways 160 and 285. In Monte Vista, take a right on 285 and drive 18 miles north towards Center. See the sign for Penitente Canyon and take a left, (West) and drive 6 miles to town of La Garita. Continue West on G road which will turn to gravel. Within a 1/2 mile the road forks. Take the left fork on County Road 38A - 1/2 mile to sign for Penitente Canyon. Take right and follow road northwest to entrance. Pass numerous campsites and road dead ends at trailhead.

Trailhead Parking On busy weekends when there is good weather, the canyon may be busy as it services rock climbers, hikers, and mountain bikers. If the main parking lot is full, it may require turning around and finding a spot in the overflow parking areas. It is free for day use, but there are fees for camping. Pets are allowed on a leash.

Length Penitente Canyon trails offer many interconnecting loops in a maze that can be from 1 to 5 hours.

Elevations 7,856 to 8,289 feet

Description The canyon is a labyrinth of trails that weave their way in and out of rock formations. Most of the climbing routes, of which there are over 300 (one pitch climbs of 50 - 100 feet), are within a mile. The trails will wind their way up to the top of the rocky plateau and offer 360 degree views. Plan to encounter hikers, mountain bikers, runners, and climbers hauling gear to climbing routes. The difficulty level varies on these trails from easy to difficult- there is something for every level. Hiking parts of the trail can be difficult on some of the highly technical mountain terrain.

Terrain The rock formations that make up the canyon have lots of vegetation along the trail from bushes, and many species of pine and aspen trees. It is also filled with desert plants of cactus, yucca, and other species. Be aware of your surroundings, as there are a few treacherous spots.

Water/Bathrooms There is a water station near the entrance to the Canyon. Bathrooms are located in the campground and trailhead area. It is best to pack in your own water just in case.

Pleasures and Perils This hike offers unique geology and terrain. It has great views that are wildly different than the Sand Dunes directly across the valley - 60 air miles! This is a high desert environment filled with things that can stick, stab, sting, and bite. Rattlesnakes are common but with common sense, can be avoided. Best to keep pets and kids close by.

Significance Geologically, La Garita Caldera was one of the largest volcanic areas in the country though not as well known as Yellowstone. Historically, the Spanish came through here gathering wood with wooden ox carts in the 1820s and 30s. Their trail ruts are easily seen on parts of the upper trails.

Notes The store in La Garita has variable seasonal hours, so its best to bring provisions with you. Group camping is available and many small groups bring all their 'toys' for several days - climbing gear, mountain bikes and hiking shoes - for an active vacation.



@kristina____c

MIDDLE FRISCO TRAIL

LENGTH:
13.1 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate to
Difficult

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive US 160 thirty-one miles West to Del Norte. Look for French Street on left just past Jack's Market and take a left (South). Out of town this Road will become CR 13, San Francisco Creek Road. This road will become gravel and will dead end 10 miles South of Del Norte at the parking lot for 2 trails, the Middle Frisco and the West Frisco ATV trail.

Trailhead Parking There is no fee. Pets are allowed. There is plenty of space for vehicles/trucks with horse trailers.

Elevations 9,460 feet at trailhead to 11,890 feet at Lower San Francisco Lake at tree line below Bennet Peak at 13,200 feet.

Description The trail crosses West San Francisco Creek and becomes a steady climb through pine and aspen forests, while also crossing several wildflower meadows. There will be a few steeper switchbacks in the dark trees with a feeling of an enchanted forest. The trail follows the creek for several miles before being on the side of the hill to the west away from the creek. Eventually the trail opens up to the high mountain ridges. Steeper and longer sets of switchbacks will finally end as will the trees and you will have earned your view of the lake, the high rocky peaks, and a bristlecone pine forest.

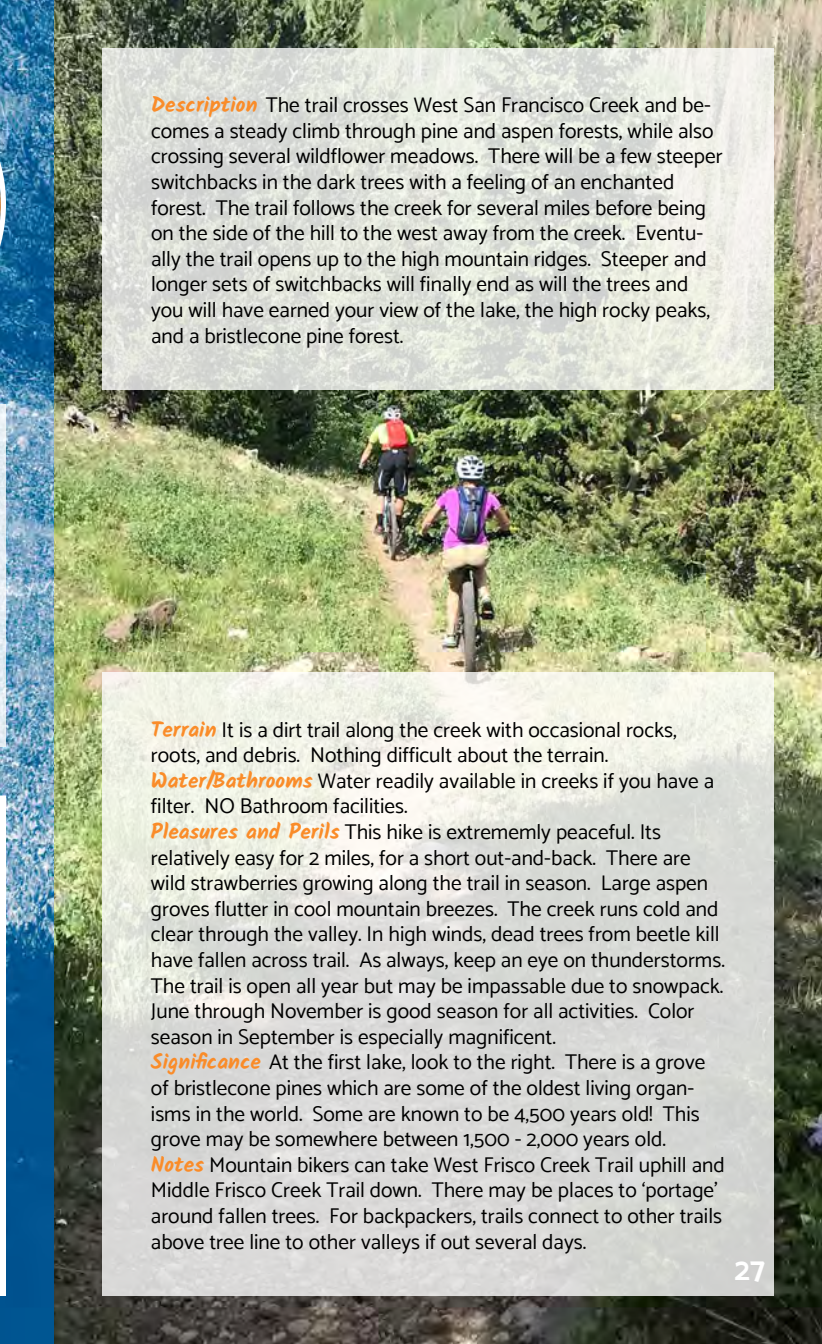
Terrain It is a dirt trail along the creek with occasional rocks, roots, and debris. Nothing difficult about the terrain.

Water/Bathrooms Water readily available in creeks if you have a filter. NO Bathroom facilities.

Pleasures and Perils This hike is extremely peaceful. Its relatively easy for 2 miles, for a short out-and-back. There are wild strawberries growing along the trail in season. Large aspen groves flutter in cool mountain breezes. The creek runs cold and clear through the valley. In high winds, dead trees from beetle kill have fallen across trail. As always, keep an eye on thunderstorms. The trail is open all year but may be impassable due to snowpack. June through November is good season for all activities. Color season in September is especially magnificent.

Significance At the first lake, look to the right. There is a grove of bristlecone pines which are some of the oldest living organisms in the world. Some are known to be 4,500 years old! This grove may be somewhere between 1,500 - 2,000 years old.

Notes Mountain bikers can take West Frisco Creek Trail uphill and Middle Frisco Creek Trail down. There may be places to 'portage' around fallen trees. For backpackers, trails connect to other trails above tree line to other valleys if out several days.



CREEDE MINING LOOP TRAIL

LENGTH:
7.25 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate to
Difficult

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive US 160 west for 47 miles to South Fork. Take a right on scenic Colorado Hwy 149 to Creede for 21 miles. Take a right in Creede on Main street, which will take you through town, up the hill into a steep walled canyon. Pass the Mining Museum and other buildings, take the Bachelor Loop Road until it forks. Numerous interpretive signs for reading about the mining history are along the road before officially entering the Historic Mining district. Depending on weather, the road may be closed in the winter, but could be cross country skied.

Trailhead Parking There are numerous places to park vehicles near the signs. Free parking. Pets are allowed. East Willow Creek road is the right fork. It receives much less traffic than Bachelor Gulch Road and is the preferred hiking/running/mountain biking route for the loop.

Elevations Beginning elevation is 8,907 feet. CR 502 tops out at 10,452 feet before beginning descent back toward Creede.

Description This one lane gravel road travels past old mines and ruins of Colorado's amazing mining history. Creede's mines produced more silver than any other mining towns in Colorado. The steep walled canyons of the Bachelor Gulch road are not so pronounced on the East Willow Creek side as you will pass mines on the side of the hill as you get toward Phoenix Park, the site of an ore mill reclamation project. An interpretive sign is there. From that point, the road begins an ascent up through steep switchbacks toward the high point through pines and aspens. The last two miles back to parking lot are a steep gravel road past extensive mine ruins. Attempt to absorb the history.

Water/Bathrooms Both available in the town of Creede. Water along trail with proper filter or treatments.

Terrain East Willow Creek Road is an easy gravel road for hiking and mountain biking in a narrow valley. This is a gradual ascent along the creek until Phoenix Park when the road leaves the valley and switchbacks of the mountain face. Good views of higher peaks emerge through the forest and then back south toward Creede will put you on CR 503 to Bachelor Gulch Road. The descent is steep through high walled cliffs and past massive old mining processing buildings. It is uniquely scenic.

Pleasures and Perils It is the best place in Colorado to see historical mining activity, buildings and structures all in one place. The vertical geology of these intersecting canyons are like nothing else in Colorado. Dust kicked up by passing vehicles can make it unpleasant to breathe. Have a handkerchief to cover your nose. Old mines are for viewing only. They are dangerous especially for curious children. Be aware of 4 wheelers and vehicles on these roads. Tight canyons and this part of the San Juans can get big thunderstorms. Know the weather of the day.

Significance Creede, though far off the beaten path in Colorado, has as colorful a mining history as Cripple Creek, Leadville and other mining towns, along with a cast of characters to complete the amazing historical past. It is well worth the trip!

Notes Creede is now mostly a summer tourist town with a Repertory Theatre, restaurants and shops. Its the perfect day trip for all sorts of activities. Grab a brochure and read up on the town!



GIANT FIR TRAIL

LENGTH:
1 Mile
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Easy to
Medium

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive US 160 west 47 miles to South Fork. Two miles west (160 is heading South at this point) on way toward Wolf Creek Pass, take a left turn onto the road with the sign that reads 'Beaver Creek Reservoir'. County Road 20 is Beaver Creek Road. Follow this gravel road for 6 miles to the end of the reservoir.

Trailhead Parking A sign for the Giant Fir Tree and wooden steps mark the trail beginning. Parking is along the road. It is free and pets are allowed.

Elevations Starting elevation is 8,912 feet and the elevation at the tree is 9,234 feet. Total gain is 322 feet.

Description This is an easy hike up through meadows and into the alpine forests for a short distance to see the largest tree in girth in the Rio Grande National Forest. Though not comparable to west coast redwoods, it is a unique standout tree for Colorado. The stunted top looks as though it may have been exploded off by a lightning strike at some point in the past. The trail is best from May to November for hiking. It can be accessed by snowshoes or cross country skis in the winter.

Terrains It is a dirt trail with occasional rocks and a few roots. It can be muddy or dusty depending on recent rains or snowmelt.

Water/Bathrooms Bring your own water. Bathrooms available at campground across from reservoir.

Pleasures and Perils This is one of those off-the-beaten-path Forest Service roads leading to camping and good fishing at Beaver Creek Reservoir. It is a nice, pleasant, short hike to see one of Mother Nature's marvels. However, keep an eye on weather. The tree is in a wooded area where ticks may be lurking during tick season, from May through July.

Significance Beaver Creek Reservoir is one of the bodies of water that holds a precious resource for the San Luis Valley. It gradually releases water into the Rio Grande. It is a good place for fishing and camping with access up the roads into the higher parts of the south San Juans. This Douglas Fir Tree is hundreds of years old.

Notes This is a fun, short, and educational hike for kids to learn the science of big trees.



WOLF CREEK PASS TRAIL

LENGTH:
Variable
Pick a Segment

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate to
Difficult

A PORTION OF THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive US 160 West 65 miles through the towns of Monte Vista, Del Norte and South Fork to the top of Wolf Creek Pass. The slowest section of this road is the first 10 miles out of South Fork as US 160 is two lane through the narrows of the south fork of the Rio Grande but once you pass through the first highway tunnel it will become four lane to the top of the pass. 160 is a main East/West route across southern Colorado and has a lot of truck traffic. Allow drive time of 80-90 minutes.

Trailhead Parking The top of Wolf Creek Pass allows parking on both sides of highway, but the larger parking lot is on the south side where the sign for Wolf Creek Pass is located. It can be busy, but generally always has a spot open. Most people only stop temporarily to read about the history of Wolf Creek Pass and the Continental Divide. Its free and pets are okay.

Elevations The top of Wolf Creek Pass is 10,850 feet. The trail tops out on this section at 11,700 feet, right at tree line.

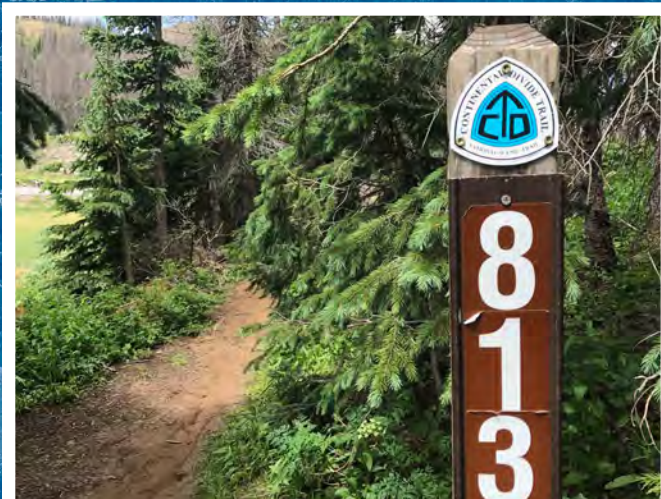
Description The trail crosses the small meadow at the top of Wolf Creek Pass and quickly gets into the pine forest. Switchbacks begin immediately but are not too steep. Beetle kill pines are still standing and creak in the mountain breezes, making the forest sound haunted. Boulder fields are crossed in several places and then the trail reaches the top of the Wolf Creek Ski area and provides big views to the East and West. The trail levels out above the ski area and provides great views to the south and west. The trail has steep drop-offs to one side while stunted trees show which way the prevailing winds blow.

Terrain The trail starts off on the north facing slopes and may be snowpacked or muddy. Roots and rocky in places as the trail crosses several boulder fields. It is easy an trail above the treeline and past the ski area.

Water/Bathrooms None. The top of Wolf Creek Pass is 18 miles West of South Fork and 24 miles East of Pagosa Springs.

Pleasures and Perils Life is good on top of the Continental Divide. The snow that melts on the San Luis Valley side of the trail drops into the Rio Grande and heads toward the Gulf of Mexico. On the Pagosa Springs side, water flows into the San Juan River and to the Colorado River. Beautiful views extend in all directions and give great perspective of the southern San Juan Mountains. This is mountain lion and bear country but they are rarely seen, as the trail is heavily used. Steep drop-offs in several places. Beetle kill pine trees can fall in heavy winds. There can be thunderstorms in the summer. Be careful with kids and dogs.

Notes The Continental Divide Trail North starts directly across the highway. Also great views and a good hike. About the same difficulty and terrain as the trail heads north toward Canada. Wild strawberries and raspberries in places during their season.



SOUTH ROCK CREEK TRAIL

LENGTH:
4 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate to
Difficult

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, take highway(s) 160/285 west to Monte Vista where 160 continues west and 285 turns north (Dairy Queen corner). Take a left (South) at this junction on Colorado 15. Drive 2.4 miles south and take a right on Rock Creek Campground Road. From there, it will be pavement for several miles past nice ranches as the road heads up the visible gap in mountains which is Rock Creek. Road turns to good gravel road but occasionally dusty. The road will be 21.6 miles to dead end from CO 15 at trailhead 3,200 feet higher. It's quite a climb all the way while passing Rock Creek Campground and Picnic Area and Comstock Campground. In normal snow years, trail should be open from June through October. Road is closed in winter.

Trailhead Parking Big wide spot at end of road is easy turn-around, even with big vehicle and trailer. There is free parking and pets are allowed.

Elevation Parking lot elevation is at 11,130 feet to 11,979 feet at the crest of pass.

Description The trail drops 85 feet quickly to Rock Creek, through where trees are being cleared. You can view the amazing rocky face of Windy Mountain across the valley. It is a big hunk of mountain! Cross the creek and turn west up rocky trail into valley with a lot of dead beetle kill pine. Within 1.6 miles, the tree line is reached as the trail turns toward south. The trail becomes a track road of sorts on open tundra with Sheep Mountain and its snow cornice a short distance to the West. Trails intersect and go many directions.

Terrain This is a rocky trail with rugged mountain views and a recovering forest. Going above the tree line is a unique experience. Looking back into forested valleys and climbing the nearby peaks will provide expansive views East into San Luis Valley.

Water/Bathroom Bring your own water or proper filter for treatment. Bathrooms are located at campgrounds and picnic grounds 7 miles below trailhead.

Pleasures and Perils Hiking above tree line is a great experience to look across the tops of distant peaks, and provide perspective of mountain ranges from a bird's eye view. High altitude tundra is a different experience than in the valleys or forests below. Trail is rocky, especially in the first mile. The high altitude above tree line will tax your lungs and heart. Weather is generally always cool. Bring extra layers. Rare is the day that it is not breezy. Thunderstorms and cold rains can bring lightning hazards and hypothermia hazards. If sunny, the high altitude rays in the cool air can cause sunburn, so wear sunscreen!

Significance This trail is not far in air miles from the Summitville superfund mining site. This valley has remained pristine except for beetle kill. Watching Mother Nature restore the forest is subtle and slow, but it is happening. This part of the San Juans sees less traffic than other mountain ranges in Colorado.

Notes Tundra is a fragile alpine environment. Stay on trails as much as possible. There are a few 'Closed Area' signs for restoration. Please honor those signs.



DUCK LAKE TRAIL

LENGTH:
7.4 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Easy to
Medium



Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive south on 285 to Antonito, and continue west on Highway 17 toward Chama and Cumbres and La Manga Passes. At the 23 mile mark, the highway goes over the Conejos River and starts the ascent toward La Manga Pass. Take the first right after the bridge. Follow the road and when it forks, stay to the left. A drive of 1.3 miles will put you at the trailhead. The trail is open from May to November. It is okay too for winter travel via snowshoes or skis.

Trailhead Parking There is plenty of open parking and the lot is free. There is also parking available anywhere on road to lot. Pets are allowed.

Elevations 9,120 to 10,600 feet.

Description The first part of trail is a bit steeper in darker pine forests, before getting up into large expanses of aspens. The trail crosses numerous meadows providing good views of cliffs in San Juans exposing their volcanic history. No real steep sections as the 1,500 feet of elevation gain is spread out over 3.7 miles. However, there are a few short steep sections.

Water/Bathrooms Bring your own water. Water along trail with proper filter or treatments. Bathrooms are available at Elk Creek Campground when open near trailhead.

Terrain This is mostly a dirt trail that will be occasionally muddy in the spring during snowmelt or during summer thunderstorms.

Pleasures and Perils All trails in this area are unique. The South San Juans below La Manga Pass have steep cliffs, but overall are rounded mountains that are easy to hike and enjoy. Duck Lake offers fishing and solitude. This was a glaciated valley, so glacial erratics are common (such as large boulders scattered along trail for climbing and examination). The Conejos River Valley is absolutely beautiful in the fall when the aspens are changing. Storms can come up quickly over the mountains from the west, as they cannot always be seen building up from the creek valley.

Significance This is the southern end of the San Juan Mountains before the New Mexico Border. In big snow years this area can be very wet. It can be one of the greener spots on the edge of the San Luis Valley. There is little development and this area has remained pristine.

Notes The resilient aspen trees along the trail have numerous carvings on them leaving nasty black scars. These are similar to petroglyphs left by natives, but simply view who has passed by in the last 20 - 50 years. Please take your memories of this trail with you in digital pictures.

DEL NORTE QUARRY TRAIL

LENGTH:
4.5 - 6 Miles
Round Trip

DIFFICULTY:
Moderate to
Difficult

Driving Instructions From Alamosa, drive US 160 west through Monte Vista and proceed another 10 miles and see the sign for the "BLM Quarry Trail System" on the left (south side) before going down a hill toward Del Norte. Drive the gravel road for 1/2 mile a short distance past the Rifle Range. The trailhead is on your right.



Trailhead Parking Park along the wide spots in the road. Parking is freestyle and free. Pets allowed.

Elevations 7,846 to 8,086 feet is the high point at the Quarry.

Description These interconnecting trails are fun as they are like an obstacle course with banked turns, ups and downs over rocks and roots, tight turns, all of which make for a roundabout way to get to the Quarry but, it is as much for the journey as the destination.

Terrain This is a classic area of high desert in the San Luis Valley. There are dry washes, rock formations and outcroppings, and vegetation from prickly pear cacti to yucca mixed with grasses and sage, with a few piñon and juniper trees spaced few and far between. The valley is always in view so it is difficult to get lost.

Water/Bathrooms None. Fill up in nearby towns before arriving. Del Norte is four miles farther west if supplies are needed.

Pleasures and Perils This area is a four season trail as the snow never gets too deep. It can be icy and muddy at times. In the summer, it can get quite hot during the day so this trail can be a good eye opening morning jaunt in the cooler temps, or an evening sunset excursion on foot or mountain bike. Because of the nature of the trails, it is about the journey being a fun course, whether challenging on a mountain bike for intense riders and trail runners, or by the sights of a slow hike. There are distant mountain views in all directions while you observe the rocks and vegetation that inhabits the high desert. The rules of the desert apply. There are things that can stick, stab, sting and bite. Rocks can be sharp and ankle biting and can cause problems for mountain bike tires. Cactus spines and yucca can also puncture tires easily. Rattlesnakes do inhabit the area. The edge of the quarry is a vertical drop if you have pets or children with you. It is a deep rock pit.

Significance Many of the public buildings in Del Norte are built from the rock mined at this quarry. Enjoy the high desert environment and how Mother Nature gives her creatures the tools they need for survival. Much of the American West has similar terrain and vegetation in these sage covered regions along with many mountain ranges.

Notes This area is near where the Old Spanish Trail came North through Colorado from Santa Fe New Mexico all the way to Los Angeles California in the 1820s to the early 1840s. Imagine being a trail guide across terrain like this for a thousand miles of deserts, mountain ranges, canyons, sparse water, dry streams, and only the occasional river.

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