

Colorado / bei Alamosa

Great Sand Dunes

DISTANCE: variabel

ELEVATION GAIN: variabel

ROUTE TYPE: variabel

The Great Sand Dunes, and most of the forests, lakes and peaks of Great Sand Dunes National Preserve, are designated wilderness. These areas can be explored by day hikes or overnight backpacking trips.

Dunes Exploration

Explore any part of the 30 square mile dunefield you wish; there are no designated trails in the sand. A dunes-accessible wheelchair is available for free loan at the Visitor Center. Summer air temperatures are pleasant at this high elevation, but during afternoon hours the sand surface can reach 150F degrees, and dangerous thunderstorms can develop. Plan to hike the dunes in early morning or evening to avoid heat exhaustion, burned feet, or fatal lightning strikes.

When there's water in Medano Creek at the base of the dunes, adults and kids alike love to splash in the stream. Watch for waves in the water, a phenomenon called "surge flow." As mounds of sand form and fall in the creek bed, water surges, similar to the action of waves at a beach. Watch a video, get detailed tips for enjoying the creek, and find current conditions and forecast flow on the Medano Creek page.

High Dune on First Ridge

There are five dunes over 700 feet tall. The high dune on the first ridge is neither the highest in elevation nor the tallest in the park, but it looks that way from the main parking lot. This is the most common destination in the dunefield, providing a great view of the entire dunefield. It is about 699 feet (198 m) from base to top. Cross a half-mile (1km) of the Medano Creek bed, then zigzag up along ridgelines to reach it. Average round trip hiking time is 2 hours.

Star Dune

Plan on about 5 hours round trip to hike Star Dune, the tallest dune in North America at 750 feet (229m). While it can be hiked from the summit of the High Dune on the first ridge, it's more direct, and less up and down, to access it via its base along the Medano Creek bed. From the Dunes Parking Lot, hike about 2 miles (3.2 km) south down the Medano Creek bed until the massive pyramid-shaped Star Dune comes into view. Follow a ridge to its summit.

Eastern Dune Ridge

By high clearance 4WD vehicle, drive to Sand Pit or Castle Creek Picnic Areas. Or, with 2WD vehicle, drive to Point of No Return, then hike 3/4 mile (1.3km) to Sand Pit or 1.5 miles (2km) to Castle Creek. Castle Creek Picnic Area offers an impressively tall, steep dune face. Both areas have access to Medano Creek, which usually flows gently through the months of fall in this area.