

Visiting New Mexico's Valle Vidal

Our Valle Vidal is accessible from both the east and west sides of New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The eastern approach begins on a gravel road 4.5 miles east of Cimarron, New Mexico that intersects U.S. Highway 64, the main highway between Cimarron and Raton, NM.

The western approach begins in Costilla, New Mexico, a small community about one mile south of the New Mexico – Colorado State line and about 40 miles north of Taos, NM on NM Highway 522.

The following travel guide describes a trip through our Valle Vidal using the western approach. From Costilla, NM at the intersection of NM Hwy 522 and NM Hwy 196 to Highway 64 just east of Cimarron, NM is about 65 miles. A full loop trip from Taos to Costilla thence through our Valle Vidal to Cimarron and returning to Taos via Eagle Nest and Taos Canyon is about 150 miles. Other variations include in-and-out trips from either east or west, or through trips enroute to other locations in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Allow a full day for the 150-mile loop trip to take advantage of many stops along the way.

You can enjoy nice meals at the St. James Hotel or other places in Cimarron, or at restaurants in Eagle Nest and Angel Fire as well as Questa and Taos. There is a great ice cream shop in a small shopping area with a gas station on the south side of the main highway at the west end of Cimarron, just west of State Road 21 (South Collinson Avenue) that leads south toward the St. James Hotel and Philmont Scout Ranch.

The Approach From The West

Costilla, NM is about 40 miles north of Taos on NM Highway 522. From the gasoline station in Costilla at the intersection of NM Hwy 522 and NM Hwy 196, travel east on the paved road (196) through the plaza and community of Costilla. From Costilla to the Valle Vidal – about 17 miles – you will be traveling through beautiful mountain valleys that are the lands of the Rio Costilla Cooperative Livestock Association. The road follows the Rio Costilla, continuing eastward through the community of Amalia. Stay left on the main road at the intersection with the Ski Rio road just past Amalia.

East of Amalia, the pavement ends, and the wide gravel road beyond this point is maintained by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). There is a large sign explaining the USFS road maintenance role. Continue eastward through the narrow, spectacular canyon of the Rio Costilla. At the east end of the canyon, the valley opens into broad meadows along the river. The surrounding land is available for various recreational uses by permit from the Rio Costilla Cooperative Livestock Association (RCCLA). Contact the RCCLA at 1-800 RIO-PARK (1-800-746-7275) and see their web site at <http://www.riocostillapark.com/>

Stay on the main road to the west entrance to the Valle Vidal. The Valle Vidal entrance is marked by a cattle guard and a parking area with USFS signs and advisories (fire danger advisories, maps, hunting & fishing regulations, camping regulations, etc.).

Comanche Point, Rio Costilla and Comanche Creek

About one and one-half miles past the Valle Vidal entrance, you will come to the confluence of the Rio Costilla and Comanche Creek. Between the streams to the east rises the massive rock formation known as Comanche Point. There are USFS signs with directions and mileages to various points in the Valle Vidal. The road to the left follows Rio Costilla for about two miles until it ends at a parking area in a beautiful valley. This parking area is a trailhead for several hiking trails in the northern section of the Valle Vidal. The dam seen to the northeast of the parking lot impounds Costilla Reservoir. The dam marks the northernmost boundary of the Valle Vidal. The side trip from Comanche Point to the end of the road and back is well worth the time for views of the Rio Costilla, meadows, forests and mountains.

Upon returning to Comanche Point, cross the river on the main road through the Valle Vidal that continues eastward along Comanche Creek. You will view wide meadows and forested mountains to the south as you climb into the high country above the stream. Watch for places to stop and enjoy the expansive views or take a walk – there are many spectacular overlooks along this road. The numerous fenced areas along Comanche Creek in this area are called “exclosures.” The fencing keeps cattle and elk herds away from the stream, allowing streamside vegetation that was destroyed by overgrazing in the past to recover. Re-growth of willows and other brushy plants is very evident inside the “exclosures.”

As you ascend to the highest points on the road, you will eventually reach a parking area/overlook where there is a large, wooden corral on the right. This is named the Clayton Corral. As you look southward from this place, you are looking along the axis of the Valle Vidal itself – the headwaters of Comanche Creek for which the entire area is named. The northeast side of Wheeler Peak – New Mexico’s tallest mountain at 13,161 feet -- dominates the horizon far to the southeast. At the Clayton Corral you are about 30 miles straight-line distance northeast of Taos, New Mexico, and standing on the Taos-Colfax County line. This is the divide atop the Sangre de Cristo Mountains between the streams that flow into the Rio Grande on the west and the Canadian River on the east.

The next stops are Cimarron Campground and Shuree Ponds. During the summer season, there may be a USFS camp host at Cimarron Campground to answer your questions. Cimarron Campground is only about ¼ mile off the main road on the Loop Road.

The Loop Road past Cimarron Campground may or may not be passable, depending upon the weather or other conditions, so be sure to ask the USFS about using the road. Otherwise, stay on the main road. Four-wheel drive is recommended for using the Loop Road in most cases. The Loop Road eventually ends up intersecting the main road on the east side of the Valle Vidal near McCrystal Campground.

Shuree Ponds, The Rock Wall, and The Eastern Valleys

There are picnic tables, restrooms and campsites at Cimarron Campground, and picnic tables and restrooms at Shuree Ponds. There is potable water at Cimarron Campground. There are some campsites with horse corrals in Cimarron Campground.

If you are not camping, the Shuree Ponds area is a fine place to stop for a picnic, a walk, and viewing the wildflowers, meadows, mountains, and forests. The Shuree Ponds are visible as you look south from the main road. The buildings beyond the ponds are the Shuree Lodge complex now used as administrative buildings by the U.S. Forest Service. There is a well-marked access road to the ponds and picnic area about one mile east of the turnoff to Cimarron Campground.

From Shuree Ponds, look to the top of the ridge to the southeast to see The Rock Wall. The Rock Wall is the geological dividing line that separates crystalline rocks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the west from sedimentary rocks of the High Plains on the east.

Beyond Shuree Ponds to the east, the main road crosses a gap in The Rock Wall, and descends into the eastern part of the Valle Vidal. There is an overlook at the first switchback in the road from which you can see far out over eastern New Mexico. The distant, dark mountain on the horizon to the northeast is Fisher's Peak near Trinidad, Colorado. The forests and meadows in the foreground of this view comprise the 40,000 acres of the Valle Vidal that were targeted for coalbed methane gas drilling before the area was protected by an Act of Congress in December 2006.

McCrystal Campground, the Eastern Meadows, and Ponil Creek Valley

The road descends the switchbacks into a flat-lying area of open forest and wide meadows. This area is the winter range for our Valle Vidal's elk herd where approximately 3,000 elk spend the winter feeding on vegetation that they dig from beneath the snow cover. The developed features in this area are McCrystal Campground and Ring Ranch, both of which are near the road. McCrystal Campground like Cimarron Campground has corrals for horses, and is the trailhead for hiking and horseback riding trails throughout the eastern part of the Valle Vidal.

From many viewpoints along the road through the meadows around McCrystal Campground, a prominent mountain peak rising above the timberline dominates the western horizon. This is Little Costilla Peak, at 12,584 feet the tallest point in the Valle Vidal. The peak is accessible by several trails, but especially the trail that ascends the south ridge from the vicinity of Cimarron Campground and Clayton Corral. Little Costilla Peak is isolated from the main Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and as such offers a commanding, 360-degree view of vast areas of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

Eastward on the main road from McCrystal Campground, it is about 7 more miles to the Valle Vidal boundary, and about 22 miles from that boundary to U.S. Highway 64 just east of Cimarron, New Mexico.

In the area east of McCrystal Creek Campground, look for effects of the 90,000-acre Ponil Fire that started in June 2002 with a lightning strike on the Vermejo Park Ranch. The fire burned southward through the Valle Vidal to the outskirts of Cimarron.

The road from the Valle Vidal boundary goes through beautiful canyon and mesa terrain along upper Ponil Creek, part of the headwaters of the Canadian River. All land on both sides of the road is part of the Vermejo Park Ranch owned by Ted Turner.

Thin, discontinuous coal beds to depths of a few thousand feet that also contain natural gas underlie all of the valleys and mesas in this area. You will see side roads that lead to gas wells, and you may encounter truck traffic that comes from Raton to the well drilling projects on the Vermejo Park Ranch. There will be signs telling you to watch for truck traffic because the trucks are large and move very fast, and many curves and hills along the road have short sight distances for avoiding trucks.

The main road from Valle Vidal to Hwy 64 is called Cerrososo Road, and it is maintained by the USFS as an access easement into the Valle Vidal from the east. Cerrososo Road eventually breaks out of the canyons into New Mexico's high plains, and intersects U.S. Highway 64 about 4.5 miles east of Cimarron, New Mexico. Upon reaching Hwy 64, turn right to go to Cimarron, or turn left to go to Raton, NM.

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Precautions

When planning a trip to the Valle Vidal, **KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**, and take fire restrictions seriously. For current fire restriction information, please call 1- 877-864-6985 or visit the Carson National Forest website at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/carson>

Contact the Carson National Forest about road conditions, maps, camping, hunting, fishing, wood gathering and other permits, seasonal travel, hiking and camping restrictions, off-road vehicle travel, and general information about the areas you intend to visit.

Carson National Forest
208 Cruz Alta Road
Taos, New Mexico 87571
Telephone: (575) 758-6200
Web: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/carson>

The U.S. Forest Service office on Cruz Alta Road in Taos sells an excellent map of the Valle Vidal Unit of the Carson National Forest. I recommend that all Valle Vidal visitors get a copy of this map, and also ask the USFS about current conditions in the Valle Vidal. Purchase the Valle Vidal Unit, Carson National Forest map at USFS offices in Taos or Questa, New Mexico, or contact the USFS to have it mailed to you. The Questa Ranger District telephone

number is 575.586.0520.

Be sure to carry plenty of your own water and other provisions you need. There is limited potable water available in the Valle Vidal. Currently, potable water is available at Cimarron Campground.

Altitudes in the Valle Vidal range from about 8,000 feet to more than 12,000 feet above sea level. Be prepared for high-altitude conditions before engaging in strenuous activity such as hiking and backpacking, particularly if you are visiting from much lower altitudes.

Be sure to carry a good spare tire and the tools to replace or fix a flat tire, if necessary. Cerrososo Road, the gravel road across the Vermejo Park Ranch east of the Valle Vidal is known for producing occasional flat tires because some of the gravel has sharp edges. However, there is occasional traffic on the road – especially during the day – and travelers on the road are nearly always helpful if you have any problems.

Have a wonderful trip, and if you have questions about the Valle Vidal, please contact the Carson National Forest.

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