

Cimarron Day Trip #5

The Southern Colorado Rockies and the Highway of Legends

Total distance: 230 miles **Estimated duration:** ~6 hours, depending on length of stops

A scenic day trip past deserted coke ovens and dikes of hardened lava, over a high mountain pass and into a beautiful valley awaits you on the Highway of Legends in Southern Colorado. Leave the east end of Cimarron by Highway 64 to the north toward Raton. After 34 miles along the eastern slope of the Vermejo Park Plateau, where buffalo roam and pronghorn antelope play, enter Interstate 25 and continue north. Drive past the four Raton exits and head up and over historic Raton Pass, along the route taken by the first travelers blazing the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. At the top of the pass there is a spectacular view of the snowy 14,000 foot Culebra Mountains. Dropping down from the summit you will travel beside the rail bed of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad on your left and the Trail landmark of Fisher's Peak high above on your right.

Bypass the community of Starkville and exit I-25 at Main Street in Trinidad. The exit ramp leads down a hill with the Visitor's Center on the far left corner, where you can pick up the small guidebook "Scenic Highway of Legends." The Highway of Legends (State Road 12) starts at this corner and goes west (left) under the Interstate. Refer to the map below after you leave Trinidad.

Your first highlight is the abandoned coke ovens on your left, across the highway from the small community of Cokedale (mile marker 63), which dates from 1907 and is on the National Historic Register. When the mines closed on 1947, the residents incorporated the town the following year. Further along the Purgatoire Valley, you will pass through the old Spanish communities of Segundo (1860s), Cordova Plaza (1861), Weston (1880s) and Vigil (1860s). In the spring, west of the town of Vigil (mile marker 43), be on the lookout for fields of mountain iris with a beautiful view of the white peaks of the Culebras. At Stonewall (mile marker 38) you will pass through a unique geological formation of vertical sandstone walls 250 feet high that runs for hundreds of miles, from Northern New Mexico into Colorado. These walls, which once formed the bottom of an ocean, can be seen at numerous locations along SR 12. Stonewall Valley was once part of the vast 1,700,000 acre Maxwell Land Grant based in Cimarron.

The highway then climbs past Monument Lake (mile marker 33) to the top of Cuchara Pass (mile marker 22), elevation 9,941 feet, with the two Spanish Peaks and their rumor of hidden gold on your right. You then drop down past the Cuchara Ski Resort and River Recreation Area, traveling alongside the cold, rushing Cuchara River to the village of Cuchara (mile marker 16 and Spanish for “spoon”). The first inhabitants of this valley were Indians who grew potatoes, as did later Spanish farmers. However, poor farming practices induced these early settlers to move elsewhere. Since the early 1900s the valley has been visited for its natural beauty.

At mile marker 11.5 are the Devil’s Stairsteps, one of over 400 lava dikes that radiate out from the Spanish Peaks. The Spanish Peaks and the dikes were formed about 25 million years ago when molten rock (magma) deep under ground rose up through cracks to solidify closer to the surface. As the older surface rock was eroded away, the harder magma became exposed as seen today. Thus, although the Spanish Peaks appear similar to many of the nearby volcanoes, such as Capulin and Sierra Grande in northern New Mexico, they are in fact simply huge uncovered domes of magma (called batholiths). In recent times, the Spanish Peaks served as guideposts for travelers along the Santa Fe Trail.

A pleasant drive, with more views of the dike formation, takes you into the quiet, quaint village of La Veta (mile marker 5). After stopping to stroll through the town and visit Fort Francisco, which dates from 1862, leave La Veta on SR 12 to the north. At the intersection with Highway 160, drive left (west) a few hundred yards and stop at the picnic area for a magnificent view of the entire La Veta Valley. The Spanish Peaks majestically stand guard above La Veta and the Devil’s Stairstep of lava dikes, while the snow-capped Culebra Peaks march away to the south. Drive back to the east along Highway 160 until you reach the town of Walsenburg, where you will take I-25 up over Raton Pass and back into New Mexico. Leave I-25 at the exit for Highway 64 a few miles south of Raton and follow the road back to Cimarron.

