

SELF-GUIDED DRIVING TOURS

Explore at your own pace – we provide the directions and tips!



2 – Vallecito Creek Hikes: *(Hiking Opportunity)*

Enjoy a short, pleasant drive through the trees along CR 500 to Vallecito Creek Campground and trailhead. Hike along Vallecito Creek for miles through 13,000+ ft peaks. The trail gains approximately 2000 feet over the first 8 – 10 miles. Use this trail to access the Continental Divide or the Colorado Trail.

Directions: From the north end of the lake immediately after CR 501 turns to the east (right), turn off CR 501 taking a left on to CR 500. Follow CR 500 to Vallecito Creek Campground and trailhead.

3 – Drive the Los Pinos Valley / Views of Teelawuket Ranch: *(Hiking Opportunity)*

Drive past the northeast side of the lake, then through the Los Pinos River Valley, past historic ranches, enjoy mountain views along both sides of the valley. Take a hike into the wilderness at the end of the road! The hike along FS 523 begins at about 8000 feet elevation and is an easy hike with limited elevation gain for miles along the west side of the river valley. There are many tall (12,000+ ft) peaks on either side of the valley and this hike is great for moose spotting. There are several trails off FS 523, up canyons and into the mountains.

Directions: From CR 501 at the very north end of the lake, continue around the lake, heading south on CR 501 past Middle Mountain Rd, continuing south with the lake on your right, to the point that the road turns east (left) at Elk Point. Stay on CR 501 – do not drive downhill on to CR 501A. At this point the road becomes a bit rougher for a couple miles, but is fully passable by most vehicles. The road curves around and heads back to the north along the west side of the river valley.

At approximately ≈1.3 miles past Elk Point, views of Teelawuket Ranch can be seen from your driving route. The historic parts of the ranch can be viewed from your route on the north side of the ranch. Do not attempt to enter the ranch – this is private property.

The road ends after ≈3.5 miles (from Elk Point) at a Forest Service Parking lot. From the parking lot, there is a trail entrance to the Wilderness with signage. Hiking from the parking lot can continue on FS road 523, which has limited elevation gain for several miles or turn off on other trails for more challenging trails up canyons and into the mountains. Use this route to access Emerald Lake or Flint Lakes.

Please note that this road passes through private property, which is noted with signage. Please do not trespass on private property and do not attempt to enter Teelawuket Ranch.

1 – Walk The Vallecito Dam:

(Walking Opportunity)

View dam construction as you drive past the lower section of the dam. Walk along the top of the dam for a level, easy walk at 7675 ft elevation. Enjoy spectacular views of the lake and the surrounding mountains as well as close-up views of dam construction from the top of the dam. Park at either end to walk a full loop in about 35 minutes at a moderate pace. The north end of the dam has views of the spillway and other take-out infrastructure.

Directions: To get to the south end of the dam – From CR 501 where the dam is visible, turn right on to CR 501A towards the Fire Station and proceed along the dam and uphill approximately 3/4th of a mile to the parking area at the public bathroom located at the south end of the dam. To get to the north end of the dam – From CR 501 where the dam is visible, turn right on the second CR 501A road. Proceed uphill approximately 1/3rd of a mile to the parking area at the north end of the dam.

4 – Middle Mountain Road Drive / Cave Basin District & Tuckerville Sites: (Hiking Opportunity)

Drive Middle Mountain Road into the San Juan National Forest above tree line. The drive has many spectacular views, some interpretive signage and is drivable by most vehicles. The road can be dusty when dry, has sharp corners and is more comfortably driven in a high center vehicle. At the end of the road, there is a parking lot and a trail into the wilderness which is also a loop trail to Tuckerville – a mining camp “ghost town” and the Cave Basin Mining District area.

The trail to Tuckerville is ≈4.5 miles from the parking lot with limited elevation gain past the approx. 10,000 feet of the parking lot. The loop trail off it to the Cave Basin area has some significant elevation gain with the hiking distance at least doubled.

Directions: From CR 501 at the very north end of the lake, continue around the lake, heading south on CR 501 for a short distance to Middle Mountain Rd (CR 501G), which heads uphill to the left before you get back to the lake. Proceed uphill on Middle Mountain Road approximately 8 miles to the road end point at a parking area.

The hiking trails to Tuckerville or Cave Basin and the Wilderness take off from here. Follow signs and maps. The trail does loop off the trail to Tuckerville around to Cave Basin and the wilderness. The trail has significant elevation gain but doesn't continue on very far past the Cave Basin area.

5 – Drive the Tour of Carvings: (Short walks or drive-only)

In the aftermath of the 2002 Missionary Ridge fire, local artist Chad Haspels created these carvings that represent the Vallecito community's rebirth in the face of such devastating loss. One of the carvings is a memorial to firefighter Alan Wyatt, who lost his life battling the fire. Haspels included a special dedication to 2002 fire at the top of each carving. For more information about the tour of carvings, to view the Wyatt memorial carving and to access the electronic tour:

<https://carvingsatvallecito.org/>

6 – Lemon Dam & Lake Drive / Transfer Park (Walking & Hiking Opportunities)

Lemon Dam is the other irrigation project in this area of La Plata County. Built in 1963 to conserve Florida River irrigation water for the farmers of Florida Mesa, it continues to play a vital role in irrigating a large portion of our county. The lake flooded the historic Lemon ranch in the Florida River Valley and today is a quiet and scenic amenity with day use areas, campgrounds and access to the Weminuche Wilderness.

Above Lemon is Transfer Park, a historic stopping point on the route to the upper Florida River drainage area and a large mining area. There is a campground at Transfer Park, interpretive signage, parking for the hiking trail up the Florida River drainage and into the Wilderness. At Transfer Park also find easy walking access to the river and a small scenic canyon created by the river just above the campground.

Directions: Approximately 4.25 miles south of the south end of Vallecito Lake is the intersection of CR 501 and CR 240. Take CR 240 to the west ≈3 miles to Helen's Store. Note Helen's Store on the corner of CR 240 and CR 243, a historic store location serving the miners, sheep ranchers, Native Americans who were accessing the upper Florida drainage area, and later, recreationists hunting and fishing in the area. At Helen's Corner, turn north and proceed uphill on CR 243 to the Florida Dam. There is parking at the dam to view the dam and the lake from the south end of the lake. Then drive along the lake ≈5.25 miles to where the road turns left into the campground located at the end of the lake. (Just before this point Miller Mountain Road takes off to the right. This road is very rough and is only accessible to ATV or 4-W vehicles. It is also a beautiful drive up to Endlich Mesa with hiking trails and Wilderness access at the end.)

At the campground past the end of the lake, stay on the road through the campground, following signs for Transfer Park. Continue uphill to Transfer Park which is located ≈1 mile past the campground.

At Transfer Park, there is a walking trail down to the river as well as a very short hike uphill along the river to overlook the scenic canyon, which is a popular rock climbing area. The main trail up the Florida Drainage takes off from the parking area. The trail heads far north to Lime Mesa where it connects to major trails off Missionary Ridge. The historic Silver Mesa Mining area can be accessed this way, as well as connecting trails to City Reservoir (the City of Durango's upper water storage), the Colorado Trail, the Continental Divide and other major trails in the wilderness.

7 – Hike to Lake Eileen (Hiking Opportunity)

Enjoy an easy access, short hike through the forest to a charming, shallow lake covered by water lilies and surrounded by aspen. This trail is a pet-friendly, moderate difficulty, 4.2 mile (round-trip) hike, with an 1140 ft gain in elevation over 2.1 miles. (7760 begin – 8900 end). This is a great 3-hour hike!

Directions: Drive north on CR 501 along the west side of Vallecito Reservoir until just before the big curve where CR 500 takes off. Look for the Forest Service Work Center; a trailhead sign is visible from the road. Park on the east side of the road, the trailhead is on the west (opposite) side.