

VALLE VIDAL ROAD TOUR

Distance: 46 miles/74 km

Time: From 3 to 8 hours

Route: From Costilla, east on Hwy 196 through the Valle Vidal to Hwy 64.

(This route is open from July through October. Predominantly 2WD dirt road.)

Vast open spaces, magnificent peaks, and abundant wildlife welcome the visitor to the Carson National Forest's Valle Vidal.

The Valle Vidal (Valley of Life) is a veritable Rocky Mountain paradise, with abundant populations of Rocky Mountain wildlife, including mule deer, black bear, mountain lion, bald eagles, and native Rio Grande cut-throat trout. In addition, the vast alpine meadows of the Valle Vidal provide critical habitat for the **largest herd of elk in New Mexico**. The herd approximates 2,000 majestic animals living in their natural habitat. This 102,000 acre wildlife paradise has just recently been federally mandated as a preserve allowing no oil or methane gas drilling ever.

A suggested tour of the Valle Vidal follows:

Just past Amalia as you head towards the west entrance of the Valle Vidal, the dirt road begins. The road is well-maintained and open to 2WD vehicles. The Rio Costilla winds its way through a narrow rock-wall canyon on its way west to empty into the Rio Grande. There are many great spots to spend some time **fishing, picnicking, or hiking** along the pristine waterway.

Shortly past the Valle Vidal entrance, you will come to the confluence of the Rio Costilla and Comanche Creek, and between them to the east is the massive rock formation known as Comanche Point. The road to the left follows Rio Costilla for a couple miles until it ends at a parking area in a beautiful valley. The dam seen to the northeast of the parking lot holds Costilla Reservoir. The dam marks the northern boundary of the Valle Vidal. Take the drive up to the parking area where you can see the dam, and spend some time looking around the Rio Costilla Valley before returning to **Comanche Point**.

From Comanche Point, cross the river and continue eastward along Comanche Creek on the main road. 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 views or take a walk – there are many spectacular overlooks along this road. As you ascend to the highest points on the road, you will eventually reach a parking area and overlook where there is a large wooden corral on the right. As you look southward from here, 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 (highest point in New Mexico at 13,161 feet)** dominates the horizon far to the southeast.

The next stops are Cimarron Campground and Shuree Ponds:

Cimarron Campground is only about 1/4 mile off the main road on the Loop Road. The Loop Road past Cimarron Campground may or may not be passable, so be sure to ask the USFS about using the road. (The Loop Road eventually ends up intersecting the main road on the east side of the Valle Vidal near McCrystal Campground.) At Cimarron Campground there are picnic tables, restrooms, campsites, water, and horse corrals.

If you're 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. There are tables and restrooms here. The Shuree Ponds – and the Shuree Lodge buildings – are visible to the right of the main road – and there is a short access road to the ponds. From Shuree Ponds, look to the ridges to the southeast to see The Rock Wall.



VALLE VIDAL ROAD TOUR (CONTINUED)

From Shuree Ponds to the east, the main road crosses over a feature called **The Rock Wall**, and descends into the eastern part of the Valle Vidal. There is an overlook at the first switchback from which you can see far out over eastern New Mexico. The distant dark mountain on the horizon to the northeast is near Trinidad, Colorado. The road descends by way of a number of switchbacks into a flat-lying area of open forest and wide meadows. Travel a short way to **McCrystal Campground** where overnight camping is permitted. McCrystal has tables, grills, toilets, spurs and horse corrals. A self-guided tour to a pioneer cabin begins at the entrance of McCrystal Campground.

From McCrystal, it's 7 miles to the eastern border of Valle Vidal. At that point, you cross into Vermejo Park Ranch, a 500,000-acre private ranch (owned by Ted Turner). Public access is allowed to drive the 17 miles through **Vermejo Park Ranch** to Highway 64. Vermejo Park (and parts of Valle Vidal) were originally acquired through the Spanish Land Grants in the 1800s. Turn right when you reach Hwy 64 and drive about 5 miles to Cimarron, and then on to Eagle Nest. You can stop for lunch or dinner at either of these mountain towns. At Eagle Nest, you have two choices for your drive back to Taos. Drive west to Red River and then south at Questa to Taos. Or drive south on Hwy 64 to Angel Fire and on through Taos Canyon and back to Taos.

For a shorter version of this excursion, you can explore the Valle Vidal as far as you like, and then travel back to Costilla and then south on Hwy 522 to Taos (approximately 50 miles).

Plan a whole day for any of these excursions, as there are many sights to see. When you visit the Valle Vidal, bring your own food and water as there is no gas, food, lodging, or retail facilities in the Valle Vidal.

Fishing within the Valle Vidal requires specific lures and baits and is catch-and-release only, with the exception of Shuree Ponds which allows up to 2 trout take-home. One of the Shuree Ponds is reserved for the use of anglers under the age of 12. West of the Valle Vidal on the Rio Costilla, you can catch and take home up to 5 trout. **Elk hunting** is by lottery. For hunting and fishing information, contact New Mexico Dept. of Game and Fish at (505) 476-8000.

The road through the Valle Vidal is closed during elk-calving season. Spring Closure on the west side of the Valle Vidal is from May 1 - June 30; Winter Closure on the east side of the Valle Vidal is from January 1 - March 31.

