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Jemez Mountain Trail

Natural forces and ancient peoples have left their marks on this area of New Mexico, a color-streaked landscape where shimmering desert gives way to forested mountains.



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Length: About 170 miles, plus side trips.

When to go: Year-round. Higher elevations provide relief from the heat during the scorching days of summer.

Nearby attraction: Heron Lake State Park, 11 miles west of Tierra Amarilla via Rte. 95.

Not to be missed: Feast Day, held August 2 and November 12 at Jemez Pueblo. Visitors can observe traditional dances.

Further information: New Mexico Tourism Department, 491 Old Santa Fe Trail, Santa Fe, NM 87503; tel. 800-545-2040, www.newmexico.org.

To venture into the Jemez Mountains is to leave the modern world behind—to travel a route that is measured not only in miles but also in time. For this region—a realm of canyons, mesas, and mountains—has remained virtually undisturbed for centuries, recalling an era when ancient Indians first colonized there, then yielded to the Anasazis, a long-extinct culture that built their villages into the cliffsides and led seemingly peaceful, simple lives.

1. Jemez River Canyon

Looming like distant thunderheads, the Jemez Mountains darken the desert horizon as Rte. 44 curves northwestward past sunbaked hills. The ridges, rising as an unbroken barrier, prove impassable until the road reaches San Ysidro, where the thin ribbon of the Jemez River guides State Rte. 4 into the tree-covered mountains. In fewer than 10 miles, the landscape here undergoes a drastic change—from arid, rocky lowlands to the lush pine woodlands of Santa Fe National Forest. The transition is particularly evident at the Jemez River Canyon, where the river and the road are hemmed in on both sides by high-climbing sandstone slopes. Shrubs and ponderosa pines claim the lower elevations, then yield their dominance to thick stands of spruces, firs, and aspens that take over the landscape, providing welcome relief for the eyes.

2. Jemez Springs

The volcanic forces that forged the Jemez Mountains a million years ago remain active today—though on a far less violent scale. Hot springs, proof of the underground unrest, bubble to the surface at Jemez Springs, a peaceful town where in winter puffs of steam rise like smoke signals into the chilly air, inviting visitors to take a dip.

Two structures of historical note stand on the northern outskirts of town: a long-abandoned Indian pueblo and a church erected by Spanish missionaries in 1622. Preserved as Jemez State Monument, their walls are slowly crumbling as the ravages of time take their toll.

One of nature's monuments, Soda Dam, in contrast, is being painstakingly enlarged. The steady accumulation, layer upon layer, of calcium carbonate formed the bizarre barrier—a process that continues to this day. Standing about 40 feet high, the marbleike monument partially blocks the flow of the Jemez River. In addition

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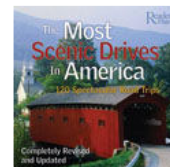
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to the slow crafting of the dam, hidden volcanic forces make themselves evident in another way: sulfurous fumes escape from underground chambers, tinging the air with a pungent smell.

3. Valle Grande

You'll soon catch your first glimpse of Battleship Rock, a massive monolith of basalt that seems to navigate the confluence of the Jemez River's forks. Farther on, State Rte. 4 leads to the Jemez Falls Campground, where a short trail twists to graceful Jemez Falls. An overlook amid the wooded countryside offers a clear view of the cascade, which fans out as it splashes down a jagged cliff.

The foliage thickens along the next leg of the drive, a climb that approaches the 9,000-foot mark, where groves of towering firs and spruces cover the mountainsides.

Then, stunningly, the forest floor falls away, with views of a vast meadowland. This is the heart of the Jemez Mountains: a great valley spreading across an area that was once a massive volcanic peak is called Valle Grande. Its energy spent, the fiery giant collapsed into itself, forming a caldera that covers about 175 square miles.

4. Bandelier National Monument

As an ancient home of Anasazi Indians, Bandelier abounds in mystery. The tribe, vanishing from history with few hints as to why, arrived in this area in the 12th century, carving dwellings into the cliffs of tuff (composed of ash and other fine volcanic particles). They were farmers who raised corn, beans, and squash among the ponderosa pines and box elders that line Frijoles Creek. The community flourished, and as the centuries rolled by, the population snowballed into the thousands. About A.D. 1550, however, the Anasazis abandoned the site, never to return. Yet their onetime presence remains indelible, and trails—some of them steep and equipped with ladders—lead through the ruins of their bygone civilization.

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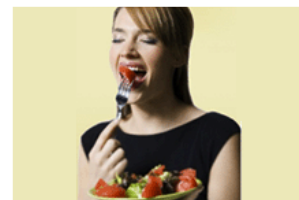
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