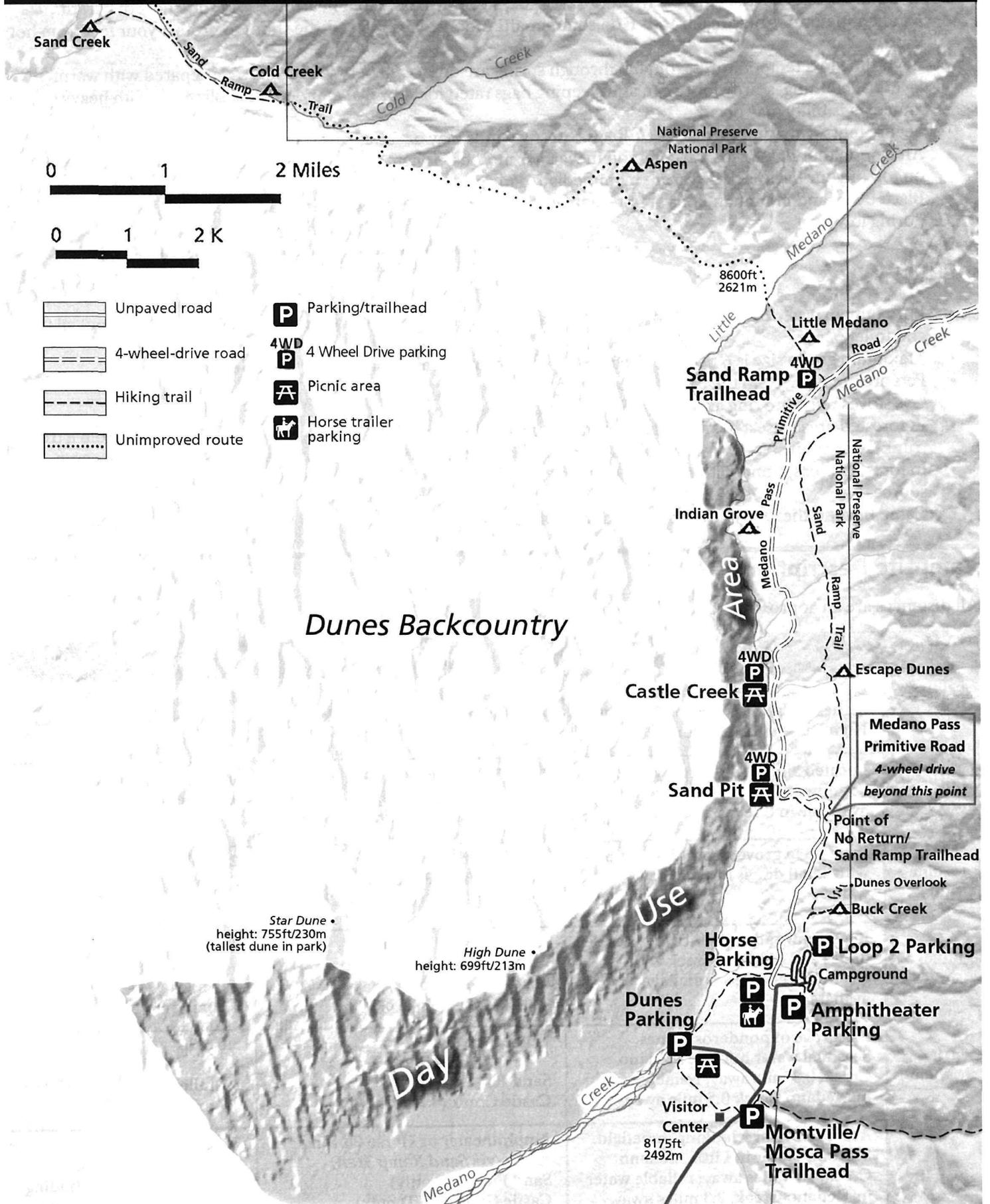


Great Sand Dunes

Backpacking in the National Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Great Sand Dunes
National Park and Preserve



A free backpacking permit for the Great Sand Dunes National Park is offered year-round, on a first-come, first-serve basis. Park rangers will distribute permits and parking passes at the visitor center during limited operating hours. Permits are limited to groups of no more than 6, and no more than 2 vehicles per group.

Designated sites along the Sand Ramp Trail are the perfect getaway for backpackers to experience a variety of landscapes - with views of the dunes, amongst mixed conifer forests at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Camping within the tallest dunes in North America is the more popular option for backpackers. Backpackers can spend the night in the Dunes Backcountry, approximately 1.5-mile trek from an assigned parking area in the national park. This option requires more experienced backpackers to carry all necessary water and prepare for unexpected weather conditions.

Safety

- Pack 1 gallon (about 4 liters) of water per person per night. Boil or treat stream water before drinking.
- Backpacking sites are located at high elevations ranging from 8,200 to over 9,000 feet (2,743m) in elevation. Drink plenty of water, avoid alcohol and caffeine, and hike slowly to reduce the probability of altitude sickness. Symptoms include headaches, dehydration, fatigue, sleeplessness, rapid heartbeat, and shortness of breath.
- Sand temperatures may reach 150° F on summer afternoons. Wear closed-toe shoes to protect your feet from hot sand.
- Nighttime low temperatures from fall through spring are often well below freezing. Be prepared with warm layers of clothing, sturdy footwear, and sleeping bags rated for subzero temperatures. Blizzards with heavy snow and low visibility may occur.
- Secure tents with sand stakes or sandbags. Strong winds may occur any time of year.
- Afternoon thunderstorms are common in warmer months. If lightning threatens, leave the dunes. Crouch low on top of your backpack if you are in immediate danger.
- Black bears and mountain lions are present, especially in forested areas. Be vigilant when hiking and camping during low light.

Regulations

- Bury human waste 6 inches below the surface, and at least 200 feet from water, trails, and camp. Pack out all trash and toilet paper.
- Maximum group size is 6 people, 2 vehicles, 14 consecutive days, and 21 days in a calendar year.
- Pets are not allowed in the park's backcountry.
- Gas stoves only; fire ring available at Sand Creek campsite.
- In forested areas, use a bear cannister or hang items with a scent 15 feet (5m) up and 5 feet (2m) out from a tree trunk. Bear cannisters are not required in the dunes backcountry. Bear box is available at Sand Creek camp.
- In forested areas, camp within 50 feet (15m) of the metal arrowhead post, and 200 feet from trails and water sources.
- Camp beyond the Day Use Area in the dunes backcountry.

Campsite Descriptions

All distances are an approximation, and dependent on route.

Site	Description	Parking	Distance	Difficulty
Dunes Back-country	Camp in low areas beyond the highest ridge of dunes, out of sight of High Dune and Star Dune.	Dunes Parking	1.5 miles	Moderate
		Amphitheater or Horse Parking	1.5 miles	
Buck Creek	Located along a drainage with cottonwood trees. Seasonal water available in Buck Creek.	Loop 2 Parking Amphitheater Parking <i>(via Dunes Overlook Trail)</i>	0.6 mile 1.0 mile	Easy
Escape Dunes	In an open grove of ponderosa pines, with small dunes nearby. Carry in water.	Loop 2 Parking Amphitheater Parking <i>(via Dunes Overlook Trail)</i>	2.4 miles 2.8 miles	Moderate
Indian Grove	In cottonwood and pine trees beside dunes and Medano Creek with generally reliable water. Privy available.	Amphitheater Parking <i>(via Sand Ramp Trail)</i>	4.1 miles	Moderate
		Sand Pit (4WD only)	2.0 miles	
		Castle Creek (4WD only)	1.3 miles	
Little Medano	In a grove of ponderosa pines. Seasonal water in Little Medano Creek, 0.3 mile away; reliable water in Medano Creek 0.5 mile away.	Horse Parking <i>(via Sand Ramp Trail)</i>	5.0 miles	Moderate
		Sand Pit (4WD only)	3.4 miles	
		Castle Creek (4WD only)	2.7 miles	
Aspen	Aspen grove overlooking dunefield. Seasonal water in Little Medano Creek, 1.6 miles away; reliable water in Medano Creek, 2.3 miles away.	Amphitheater or Horse Parking <i>(via Sand Ramp Trail)</i>	7.0 miles	Difficult; route-finding skills required
		Sand Pit (4WD only)	5.3 miles	
		Castle Creek (4WD only)	4.6 miles	
		Sand Ramp Trailhead (4WD only)	2.3 miles	
Cold Creek	In a grove of ponderosa pines. Seasonal water in Cold Creek, 300 feet away; reliable water in Sand Creek, 1.5 miles away.	Amphitheater or Horse Parking <i>(via Sand Ramp Trail)</i>	10.1 miles	Very difficult; route-finding skills required
		Sand Pit (4WD only)	8.5 miles	
		Castle Creek (4WD only)	7.8 miles	
		Sand Ramp Trailhead (4WD only)	5.5 miles	
Sand Creek	In a cottonwood grove near Sand Creek with generally reliable water. Fire ring and bear box at site.	Horse Parking <i>(via Sand Ramp Trail)</i>	11.6 miles	Very difficult; route-finding skills required
		Sand Pit (4WD only)	10.0 miles	
		Castle Creek (4WD only)	9.3 miles	
		Sand Ramp Trailhead (4WD)	7.0 miles	