

Cimarron Day Trip #3

Capulin Volcano, Folsom Man and Johnson Mesa

Total distance: 150 miles **Estimated duration:** ~4 hours, depending on length of stops

Your trip begins at the east end of Cimarron where Highway 64 and State Road 58 intersect and follows Highway 64 north, tracing the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail. The map provides visual clues to the Waypoints listed below (mileage is approximate). Comments and additions to Historic Markers are given in brackets.

Geologically, the area east of the town of Raton is termed a volcanic field (the Raton-Clayton volcanic field), owing to its large number of volcanoes. Crossing New Mexico from east to west in a line roughly from the northeastern corner to the west-central Arizona border and on into northern Mexico is the Jemez lineament, marking over half a dozen volcanic fields. New Mexico's volcanoes have been particularly active during the past 20 million years, with the most recent events occurring only a few thousand years ago. The Raton-Clayton field contains several different types of volcanoes ranging from the relatively small "cinder cone" of Capulin to the massive shield volcano of neighboring Sierra Grande. The presence of New Mexico's numerous volcanic fields has been attributed to a warming of the Earth's mantle (a rock layer about 25 miles below the surface) resulting from the collision of the Pacific and North American continental plates off the coast of California.

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| 0 | 1 | Begin the tour by driving north on Hwy 64 at the east end of Cimarron. |
| 0.5 | 2 | Past the Baptist Church on your left is a two-sided historic marker that reads:
Cimarron – This village on the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail was settled around 1844. In 1857 it became the home of Lucien B. Maxwell, and headquarters for the famous Maxwell Land Grant of almost 2,000,000 acres. An agency for Utes and Jicarilla Apaches was located here from 1862 to 1876.
The reverse side reads: Colfax County War – For twenty years after the 1869 sale of the Maxwell Land Grant, homesteaders, ranchers, and miners fought the new owners for control of this enormous region. The resulting murders and general breakdown of law and order led to the removal from office, in 1878, of Territorial Governor Samuel B. Axtell. [Lew Wallace, the author of <i>Ben Hur</i> , replaced Axtell as governor of the Territory of New Mexico.]
Continue north on Hwy 64. A few miles north of Cimarron you may observe bison (buffalo) just beyond the fence line bordering the highway. Since the Ice Ages, the deep, wind-protected canyons and streams that line the eastern slopes of the Rockies have provided shelter, water and grass to large herds of first mammoth, then ancient bison, and now cattle. |

- 25 3 At the junction of Hwy 64 and SR 445, an historic Marker previously placed here read: **Santa Fe Trail**: Opened by William Becknell in 1821, the Santa Fe Trail became the major trade route to Santa Fe from Missouri River towns. The two main branches, the Cimarron Cutoff and the Mountain Branch, joined at Watrous. Travel over the Trail ceased with the coming of the railroad in 1879. The difficulty of bringing caravans over rocky and mountainous Raton Pass kept most wagon traffic on the Cimarron Cutoff of the Santa Fe Trail until the 1840s. Afterwards, the Mountain Branch, which here approaches Raton Pass, became more popular with traders, immigrants, gold-seekers, and government supply trains.
Continue north on Hwy 64.
- 8.8 4 Just before the intersection of Hwy 64 and I-25, in the pullout on the left-hand (northwest) side of the highway is an historical marker that reads: **Clifton House Site** – Three-quarters of a mile west of here at the Canadian River crossing was the popular overnight stage stop on the Old Santa Fe Trail. Clifton House was built in 1867 by rancher Tom Stockton, and materials were brought here overland from Dodge City. For years it served as headquarters for cattle roundups. After abandonment of the Santa Fe Trail in 1879, it fell into disuse and burned. [In 1995, all that remained of the sight site was a 3-foot high segment of adobe wall.]
- 0.3 5 Continue north on Hwy 64 onto I-25 toward Raton.
- 4.7 6 At the second Raton I-25 exit, turn right (east) onto Hwy 64.
- 27 7 After 27 miles you come to the small town of Capulin (Spanish for choke-cherry). Turn left (north) onto SR 325 toward Capulin National Monument. Several historic markers in the area read: **Capulin Mountain National Monument** – An outstanding example of an extinct volcano cinder cone, Capulin Mountain was formed as early as 10,000 years ago. In cinder cones, lava pours from cracks in the base rather than over the top. Capulin itself was the escape hatch for gases that blew lava fragments into the air where they solidified and landed red hot on the cone. [More recent geological surveys have shown that Capulin is 56,000-62,000 years old.] Due east lies Sierra Grande volcano with the historic marker: **Sierra Grande** – Largest extinct volcano in northeastern New Mexico, Sierra Grande rises to an elevation of 8,720 feet, one of many volcanoes, cinder cones, and flows that cover more than 1,000 square miles of area in northeastern New Mexico and southeastern Colorado eastward to the Oklahoma state line.
- 2.9 8 Turn right at the entrance to Capulin Mountain National Monument. Pay the entrance fee at the Visitor’s Center and pick up a Park Service pamphlet describing the Monument (the first National Monument so designated by Congress, in 1916). A short drive takes you to a parking lot at the rim of the volcano. From here you may walk down into the caldera or around the entire rim with nice views of the surrounding volcanic field. When finished, follow the same road back to SR 325.

- 6.1 9 Turn right onto SR 325 and continue to the town of Folsom, where there is a seasonally-open museum containing a collection of local antiques as well as replicas of original Folsom points and information about their archaeological significance (see below).
- 0.2 10 After a visit to the museum, continue on SR 325 and turn left (west) onto SR 72 – a short distance ahead you will cross railroad tracks.
- 8.0 11 After about 8 miles, you will come to a sharp bend in the road. Continue on SR 72 (left) – the road that veers goes right leads to Trinchera Pass and Colorado. An historic marker mentions the importance of this road:
Goodnight-Loving Trail – In order to avoid the high toll charged for each animal on the Raton Pass of the Goodnight-Loving Trail, Charles Goodnight blazed this route through Trinchera Pass in 1868. Because it was shorter, had easier grades and was toll-free, later cattle drives followed Goodnight’s example.
- 1.7 12 At mile marker 27.1 on SR 72 was an historic marker that read: **Folsom Archaeological Site** – Near here was the site of the discovery of a spear point between the ribs of an extinct species of bison. This find established man’s presence in North America about 10,000 years ago, prior to the extinction of large mammals at the end of the last Ice Age. [The site is in the valley to the left (south) of the highway and was last excavated in 1999-2000 by archaeologists from the Denver Museum of Natural History. Extinct bison were about 50% larger than modern bison.] Continue on SR 72 as the road climbs to the top of Johnson Mesa. A mesa (meaning “table” in Spanish) is a geological formation in which erosion has narrowed an initially wide region (or plateau) that is capped by a layer of resistant rock. In this case, the top layer of Johnson Mesa was formed by one of the earlier basaltic lava flows associated with the Raton-Clayton volcanic field.
- 4.3 13 The height of the mesa above the surrounding region can be gauged here by the view of the eastern Colorado plain to the north.
- 8.0 14 At this point Johnson Mesa reaches its maximum elevation of 8250 feet. The ample moisture the mesa top receives facilitates degradation of the volcanic rock composing the mesa caprock. This releases magnesium into the soil, a necessary mineral for plants as well as animals.
- 9.7 15 At the intersection with SR 526, the creek to the right (north) leads to the site of the former coal-mining town of Sugarite, where Sugarite Canyon State Park offers canoeing, fishing, hiking and biking.
- 3.8 16 Continue west on SR 72 to the intersection with I-25 and turn left (south). Exit I-25 at the intersection with Hwy 64 and drive back to Cimarron.
- 40 17 The tour ends upon arrival at the intersection with Highway 64 in Cimarron.

