

# backcountry images

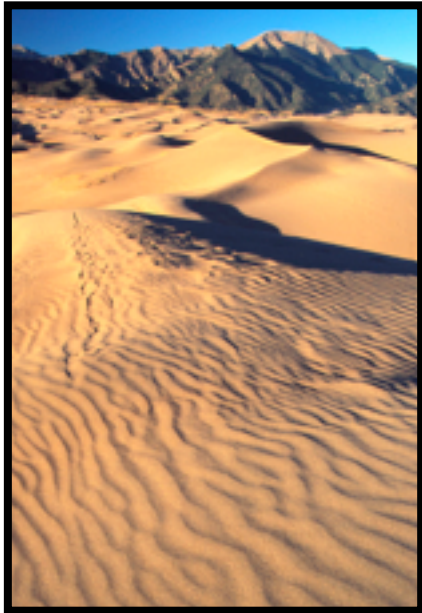


## Great Sand Dunes

In south central Colorado, along the western slopes of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, stands the tallest sand dunes in North America, rising to over 750 feet above the flat, arid grasslands of the San Luis Valley floor. These magnificent dunes, extending for over 39 square miles, are located within the Great Sand Dunes National Monument. The formation of these dunes began thousands of years ago as winds picked up sand from the basin of the ever-shifting Rio Grande river and deposited it along the western edge of the Sange de Christo (Blood of Christ) mountain range.



As a resource for quality landscape and nature photography, [backcountryimages.com](http://backcountryimages.com) is proud to launch this series of Photo and Travel Guides to help fellow photographers discover new and classic locations. These guides will provide accurate and up to date information, and a sampling of my favorite images.



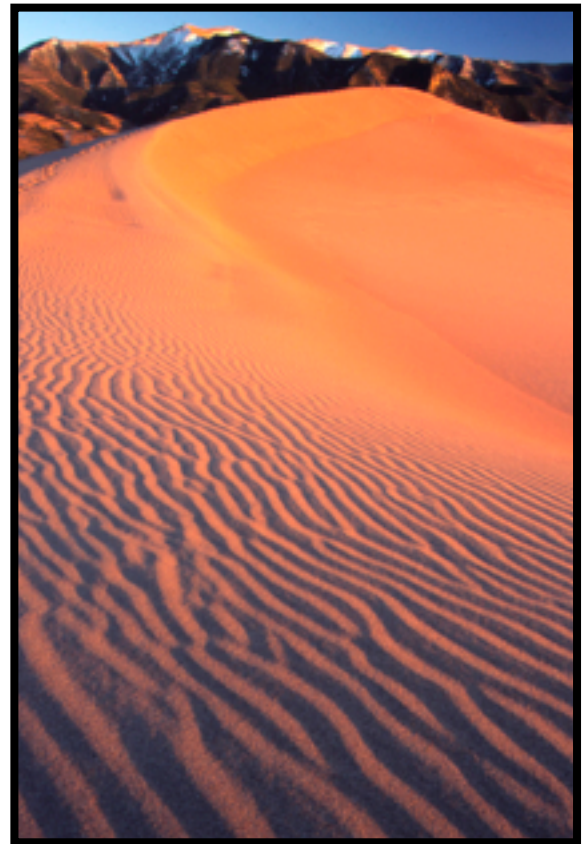
The Great Sand Dunes National Monument has the three ingredients necessary for the formation of sand dunes; sand, wind and a natural "trap". The Sangre de Cristo mountains, located within the Rio Grande National Forest, stretch along the eastern border of the monument and rise over 4,000 feet above the sand dunes. These mountains, part of the southern end of the Colorado Rockies, provide the natural trap for the creation of these magnificent dunes. Today, the dunes are constantly being shaped and reshaped as the wind continues to carry sand from the valley floor and deposit it in the monument.

## Great Sand Dunes

Because the sand dunes are located at over 8,000 feet above sea level,

summers tend to be cooler, while winter months can bring freezing temperatures and heavy snow. Eighty-five percent of the monument's visitation occurs between May and September, and accommodations in the Pinyon Flats campground can be scarce during this time. Spring tends to be the windiest season, which can present a problem for photographers and their equipment. In the fall, the days are milder and the colors of the aspen trees decorate the mountainsides. During the summer months, the sand can reach temperatures of over 130 degrees and adequate hiking shoes, sunscreen and plenty of water are highly recommended.

The monument and the campgrounds are open year round, however, summer months tend to be very crowded. Late spring and early fall are my favorite times due to the cool evenings, smaller crowds, fall colors and less windy conditions. The hour before sunset tends to be the best time to be photographing the dunes. As the evening skies fill with color, the shadows grow longer and more dramatic. The abstract shapes created by the sand, long shadows and colorful sunsets



offer endless photographic opportunities. Sunrise is more of a challenge, as the sun does not rise over the eastern mountains until late morning. Venturing out into the dunes in the early afternoon and waiting for the sun to set has worked best for me. However, this does mean hiking back down the



dunes in the twilight or in the dark. Carrying a flashlight and making a note of your position before it gets too dark helps you to find your way back to the visitor center parking lot.

## Hiking and Trailhead Information

The entrance to the Great Sand Dunes National Monument is located 38 miles north-east of Alamosa, Colorado on Highway 150. Alamosa is about three hours east of Durango and about three hours southwest of Colorado Springs. Because of the remote location of the monument, the crowds are minimal in the early spring, winter and late fall.

The best way to experience the beauty of the sand dunes is to hike into them. From the visitor center parking lot to the top of the first sand dune is about one mile, however, this short hike can be quite strenuous as you climb in the deep sand to the summit of the dunes. However, it is well worth the effort. From the top of the dunes, the view is breathtaking. To the west you can watch the sunset over the San Luis Valley, and to the east, the snow covered mountain peaks provide a dramatic background to the changing patterns in the dunes.



## Photography Tips & Information

The abstract patterns and deep shadows in the sand dunes are my favorite images to capture. As the shadows grow longer before sunset, the interplay of sand and shadows intensifies. In addition to these patterns, the snow covered mountains provide an excellent contrast to the dunes themselves. I use a wide angle lens (20-28mm) to create sweeping vistas of the patterns in the sand dunes and the mountain peaks in the distance.

A polarizing filter helps to reduce the glare from the sand and darken the sky to a near cobalt blue when facing north, however, be careful not to over-polarize if you prefer a more natural color to the sky. I have found it best to include as little sky as possible during the daytime, unless the skies are filled with dramatic light and clouds. Since the sand is slightly lighter in tone than neutral (18%) gray, I have found it best to open up 1/2 to 1 stop to render the sand its natural color.

On the other hand, slightly underexposing your images allows the shadows to go black and gives the sand a deep brown or purple color de-

pending in the colors in the sky. I have also used a short telephoto lens to capture the abstract patterns in the sand itself.

Prairie sunflowers that bloom in the spring make beautiful images when contrasted with the brownish hues of the sand dunes. Tiger salamanders, sand-treader crickets, kangaroo rats and bullsnakes can sometimes be found roaming the dunes and nearby stream beds. Isolating the tracks left behind by these creatures in the sand, as well as the footprints of other hikers, makes for interesting compositions. Fortunately, the dunes are reshaped so quickly by the wind that it is often possible to find pristine, untouched dunes to photograph each morning. These untouched dunes make the most dramatic images.

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