



Cimarron



Engine #278 atop the truss bridge in Cimarron.

The historic town of Cimarron was once a bustling train depot filled with cattle, ore, and sightseers from 1882 to 1949. It is now a site where one can revisit the past and recreate.

Coming of the Train

In 1853, Captain John Gunnison led a survey through this area while searching for the best route for a transcontinental railroad across the nation's midsection. Gunnison and the party were killed in 1853 while in Utah, after which this river was named for him. In the 1870s, General William Jackson Palmer and surveyors, a contingent of the Hayden expedition, tried again to find a path for the railroad.

The tracks of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RG) began in Denver and eventually passed through this area to fulfill the company's dream of running rail line all the way to Salt Lake City, Utah. The tracks arrived in Cimarron after being laid out for almost 15 miles (24 km) along the wild Gunnison River in the depths of Black Canyon. Irish and Italian immigrants provided much of the labor.

The tracks in Black Canyon had rails three feet apart, compared to the standard gauge

of four feet, eight and one-half inches. This meant less labor and smaller bridges, good for the mountainous terrain. The narrow gauge and smaller cars also allowed for a more flexible train to maneuver through the narrow mountain canyons.

When the railroad crews finished laying track through the canyon, they paused in the area near what today is Cimarron. Originally W. M. Cline's Ranch, this land was quickly turned into an "end-of-track" tent city. Hundreds of railroad workers lived here temporarily while the rail line was being extended over Cerro Summit, heading west towards the town of Montrose.

Cerro Summit, to the west, had a 4% grade, making it impossible for locomotives to clear the summit without assistance. Helper engines had to be brought in. These helper trains were stored and maintained in the little town of Cimarron, turning a fleeting tent city into a thriving community for over 70 years.

Life in Cimarron

After riding through the dramatic Black Canyon and watching the Gunnison River froth and bend below the cliffs, early visitors arrived at a quaint little 11-saloon town called Cimarron.

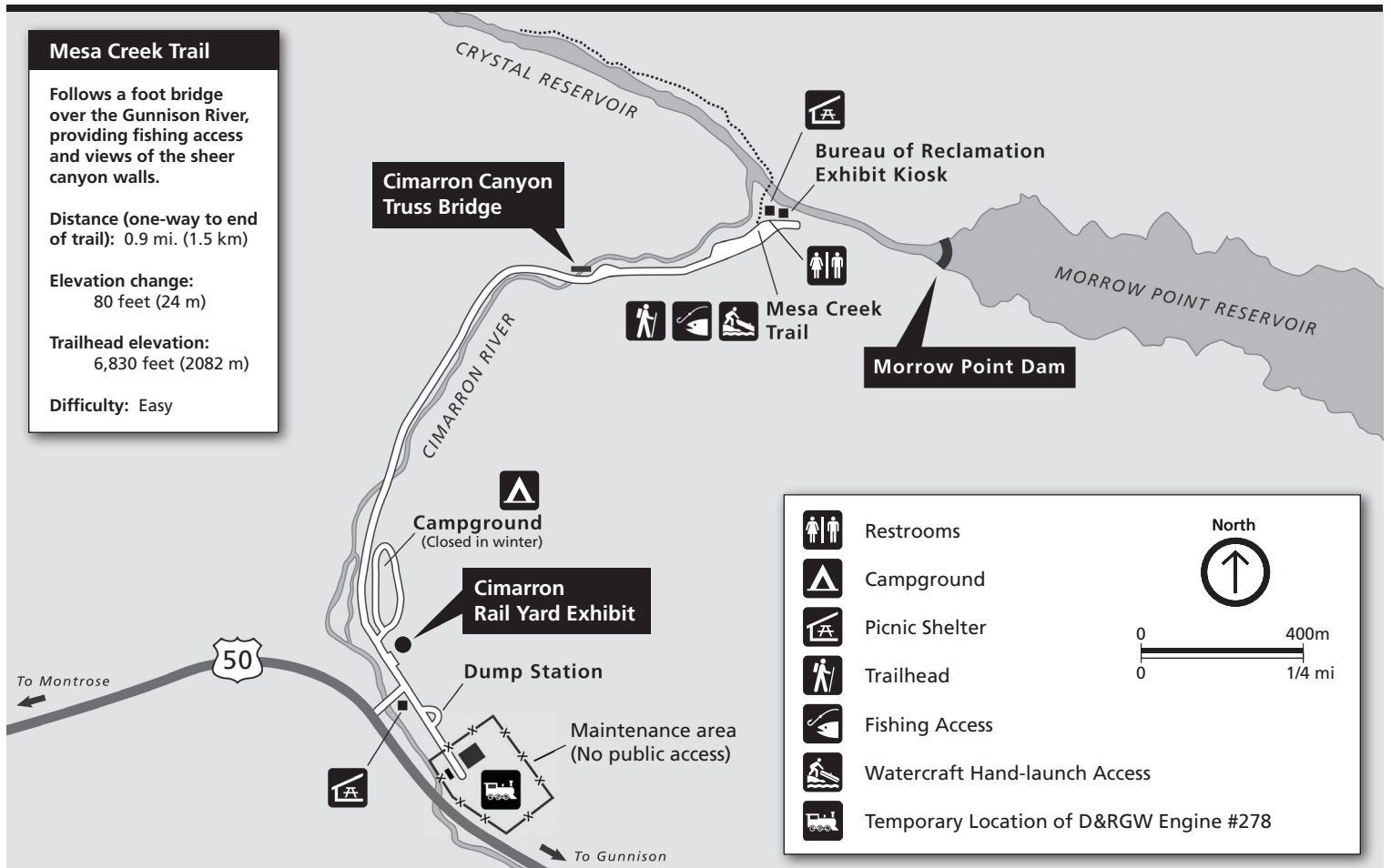
Stepping out of a passenger train mid-day in Cimarron, your nose would be filled with the scent of coal and oil as you were greeted by the faces of townsfolk who had gathered to watch the train arrive. Only having 20 minutes to eat, you would be ushered into the Black Canyon Hotel for a tasty trout dinner for only 35 cents.

While you were eating, the mail, supplies, and food were withdrawn from the train, and livestock would be loaded on. The train

conductor, looking vibrant in his crisp blue uniform with shiny brass buttons, would signal when it was time to leave by bellowing, "A-a-a-board!"

After all of the passengers had been loaded and the train was beginning to move, the waitresses from the hotel, also known as "beanery queens," would be outside waving to the train until it disappeared in the distance. There was a moment of repose, and then the town would prepare to do it all over again.

Passenger service on the D&RG through Black Canyon ended in 1936, and the last excursion train ran on May 30, 1949.



Rail Yard Exhibit

Visitors can tour the rail yard exhibit at Cimarron. Here you can explore loading corrals and stock cars, co-mingled with

interpretive displays that will help the story of this 1882 railroad town come to life.

Truss Bridge

Constructed in 1895, this truss bridge is the last remaining railroad bridge along the Denver and Rio Grande's narrow-gauge railroad route through the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Originally, this train line was created to distribute ore from the nearby San Juan Mountains, as well as agricultural products. By the late 1800s though, it also quickly became a scenic excursion line.

Several cars, most notably Engine #278, formerly rested upon this bridge. Engine #278 was originally built by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania in 1882. This engine was built to carry mainline freight, and also to be a helper engine (engines that assist other trains up steep hills). For several years, this engine was used on the Crested Butte Branch of the Denver and Rio Grande's lines. It is a reminder of our rich past and as a symbol of the transformation of the American West.

2026 update: Engine #278 and its associated cars have been removed from the truss bridge for repair and rehabilitation. They will return to public display in Cimarron once repairs are completed in the future.

Camping

Cimarron Campground is located 20 miles (32 km) east of Montrose, CO on U.S. Highway 50 at the site of the historic railroad town of Cimarron, at elevation 6,895 feet (2101 m). The campground accommodates tents to medium-sized RVs. It is open late spring to early fall, with 21 first-come first-served sites. There are five pull-through

sites in the campground as well as a dump station. Drinking water is available mid-May to mid-September. There are no showers and no electrical hookups. Railroad exhibits are adjacent to the campground. Crystal Reservoir below Morrow Point Dam is about 1.1 miles (1.8 km) down the road into the canyon.

Picnic Areas

Covered picnic areas are located at the entrance to Cimarron and near the Mesa Creek trailhead. Vault toilets are located at the Mesa Creek trailhead. Remember to pack out what you packed in.

For a more secluded picnic, hike down the Mesa Creek Trail. After crossing the bridge and walking a short distance, you will find a picnic table in a small opening along Crystal Reservoir.

Hiking, Fishing, and Boating

Cimarron offers several recreational opportunities. Bring your fishing gear and enjoy the serenity of Crystal Reservoir, or take a hike along the Mesa Creek Trail, 0.9 mile (1.5 km) one-way.

If hand-launching a boat into Crystal Reservoir, beware of the variability in Morrow Point Dam releases, managed by the Bureau of Reclamation. Water level and current speeds change rapidly. A 25 hp engine or less is allowed on the reservoir. It can be

difficult to power a boat back to the landing at Mesa Creek trailhead.

NOTE: To stop the spread of aquatic invasive species, **all motorized watercraft require an inspection prior to launching.** The nearest inspection station is at the Lake Fork boat ramp (closed in winter). For more information, contact (970) 641-2337 ext. 213, preferably at least 24 hours before launching. Inspections are required by law (CRS Title 33-10.5-105).