

# super-sized sand box

Make Great Sand Dunes National Monument your playground



Left to right: Ripples in the sand, Great Sand Dunes National Monument, Colorado / Sunset sand dune skipping

BY MARK R. JOHNSON

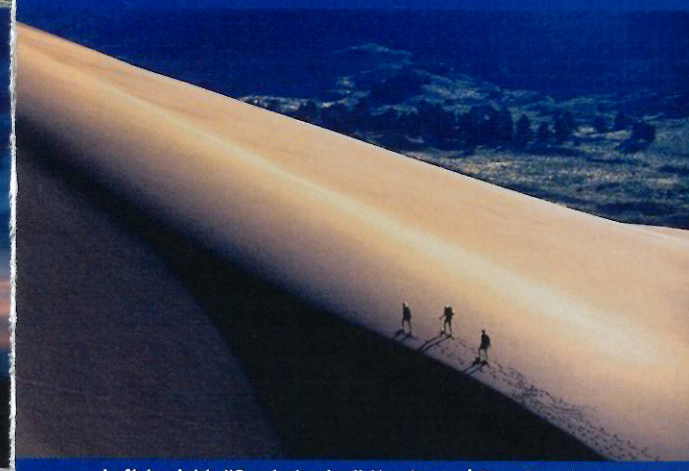
## destination

**Sand pervades every fold of our clothing and gear. The three of us are hunkered down in a sea of sand, backs to a blow. The gentle wind, like an intermittent exhale, sweeps thin veils of sand over us. I'm wearing mountaineering glasses and have a bandana tied outlaw-style across my face, but still the little mineral finds its way into the corners of my eyes and it coats my ears and mouth. I run my tongue across my teeth, regarding the grit with equal parts fascination and disgust.**

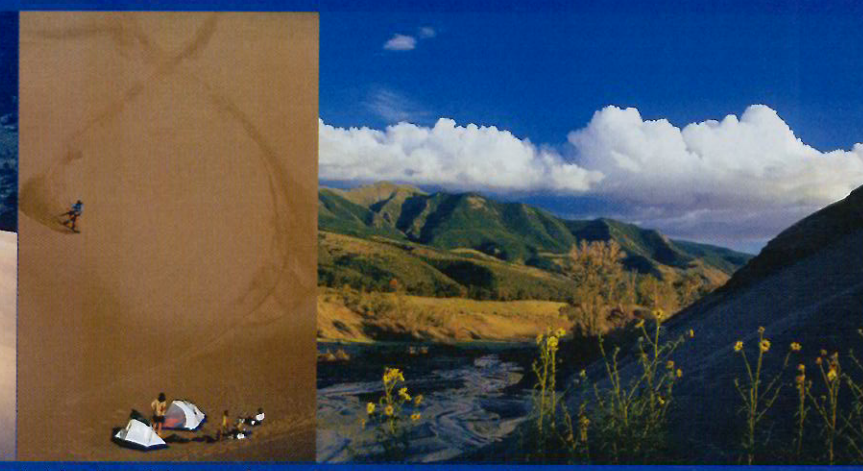
Faces shielded, saddled with packs, we probably look like a couple of desert vagabonds. Maybe what gives us away—showing how ridiculously out of place we really are—are the skis, poles, and a snowboard jammed in the sand beside us as a windmark.

I've never "surfed" a dune before, and these ones are massive—some as high as 750 feet, the tallest in North America. They roll out for nearly thirty square miles around us. Climbing ours took an eternity, trudging up the

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): HOWIE GARBER / JAMIE BLOOMQUIST/O12.COM / JAMIE BLOOMQUIST/O12.COM



Left to right: "Sand-shoeing" the dunes / Snowboarder carving the last few turns into camp / Great Sand Dunes National Monument



long, soft ridge, boots sinking back with every step almost to their start.

Rested, I get up and shake off the sand, then grab my snowboard and head to the edge. Strapping in, I gaze down the steep slope: There are no obstacles to contemplate, no conditions to consider, just a blank canvas and a cluster of five-foot-high brush. Then I let go, dropping in and cutting across the face, the landscape a whirling blur in my periphery. And in a fast tumble of blue sky and spraying sand, I'm suddenly made aware of what happens when you don't edge hard enough. But I come up smiling, feeling like a kid again, at play in a larger-than-life sandbox.

The Great Sand Dunes National Monument, located in southern Colorado's San Luis Valley, is indeed the ultimate sandbox. Containing a total of 4.5 billion cubic meters of sediment, there is enough sand here to cover, 1 inch deep, the entire state of Florida. The sand comes from the neighboring San Juan Mountains, washed out long ago by the Rio Grande. When the river later shifted course, southwesterly winds did the rest, pushing the accumulated debris until it could migrate no farther—to the base of the rugged Sangre de Christos.

Winds kick up anytime of year, though they're most active from March to June. To be here, in the midst of their swirling, is to witness geology in motion: Feed a handful to the wind and watch it join the infinite, shifting sculpture. You could probably stare at the undulating surface, crimped with sharp, wind-chiseled edges and molded with softly rounded shoulders, for hours without really looking at anything in particular.

It's several miles in to the very heart of the dunes, but

even a short hike from the parking lot is enough to put visitors on a different planet. You can go wherever you like, scrambling up, jumping off, and rolling down. The going, though, is demanding—one step forward, a half-step back. Some hikers wear snowshoes (sandshoes, really) to get around with greater ease.

Backpackers can pitch a tent anywhere on the dunes (with a free permit) or head into one of the designated backcountry sites along the dune field perimeter. Pinyon Flats, a drive-up campground, offers eighty-eight sites near the dunes and is open year-round. Keep in mind that at 8,200 feet the temperatures can be deceptively cool: Summers can see highs in the eighties, but the rest of the year one can expect moderate daytime temps and cool, even freezing nights.

More than just a surreal sea of sand, the monument includes grasslands, creeks, forest, and mountains in its expanses. In November 2000 it gained National Preserve status, adding some 42,000 acres to its resources. Hike the 3.5-mile Mosca Pass Trail to earn an incredible view of the San Luis Valley, or meander along the cool waters of Medano Creek amid groves of aspen and cottonwood. To the south finlike Blanca Peak, at 14,345 feet, is one of Colorado's highest fourteeners and offers a good challenge for mountaineers.

But of course the dunes, as captivating as they are, will not surrender center stage. I remember feeling drawn in, over one dune and the next, until we were swallowed up by sand. And how looking back on the landscape and seeing the miniature dunes of our tracks punctuating the vastness was strangely comforting. They would disappear, just like those of travelers before us—reminders of our impermanence in such an evolving landscape. ©