

Aztec Ruins

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Monument
New Mexico



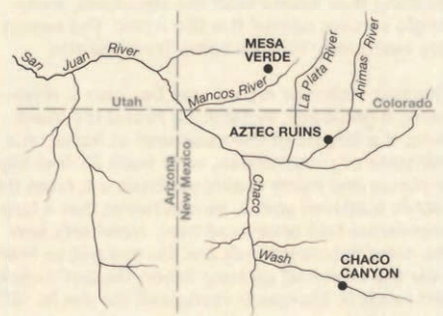
West Ruin

Over two centuries ancestral Pueblo people at Aztec carefully planned and built a settlement that included an array of large public architecture and smaller structures, earthworks, and ceremonial buildings. Aztec's extended community rivaled Chaco Canyon, 55 miles south, where a network of

structures took shape and flourished between 850 and 1130. Aztec's first inhabitants were strongly influenced by Chaco in architecture, ceramics, and ceremonial life. At first Aztec may have been an outlier of Chaco, an ancillary place that supported Chaco activities. Or it may have been a center in its own right

as Chaco's regional influence waned after 1100. The population at Aztec ebbed at times but persisted through cycles of drought and cultural changes. Even after several generations, the final layout of the community adhered to a master plan set out by the initial builders in the late 1000s. The people left

during the late 1200s, leaving behind well-preserved structures and artifacts that tell of their lives in this region. Today many indigenous peoples of the Southwest are their descendants, maintaining strong cultural and spiritual ties to this site.



An Ancestral Community

It is the river that makes this land hospitable. Rising in the San Juan Mountains to the north, the Animas flows across the plains of northwestern New Mexico. Near the modern city of Aztec, early farmers took advantage of its perennial waters. The "ancestral Pueblo" people, as some of their descendants prefer they be called, had long lived in this area and across the Four Corners region. Sometime late in the 1000s a group planned and began to build a large community on rising ground overlooking the river.

By the time building ceased in the late 1200s, the complex consisted of several great houses, tri-walled kivas, small residential pueblos, earthworks, roads, and great kivas. Far from being an uncontrolled urban sprawl, the formal layout of the settlement, purposeful landscape modifications, and the orientation and visual relationships among the buildings all indicate a grand design. Over two centuries it reached its final physical expression—several generations after the blueprint was conceived and building first began.

Most prominent are the great houses—well planned, public buildings of many connected rooms that surrounded a central plaza. Construction of much larger great houses followed. By 1109 the people began harvesting wood from distant sources to build the largest structure, now known as the West Ruin. This great house took its final form by 1130, after two episodes of stockpiling timber followed by intense construction. The West Ruin resembled the great houses built at Chaco and elsewhere in the Southwest. It consisted of at least 400 contiguous rooms of three stories and numerous kivas—circular ceremonial chambers—including a great kiva in the plaza that was used for community-wide events. The thick, tapering walls consisted of a core of roughly shaped stones and mud mortar sandwiched between dressed sandstone masonry exteriors.

Building continued over the next 150 years on the East Ruin, a great house of similar construction and layout as the West Ruin. They raised walls for scores of smaller structures also, and sculpted the landscape. Earth pedestals elevated the larger buildings, berms formally defined

the space surrounding them, and many human-built, linear swales called "roadways" radiated across the area.

In its earlier years the settlement was marked by a strong Chacoan influence, and it prospered as a regional administrative, trade, and ceremonial center. Later, despite periodic droughts and the decline of the far-flung Chacoan social and economic system, its regional prominence persisted as construction and remodeling continued in the Chacoan style.

By the late 1200s the people had moved from Aztec and the Four Corners region. A combination of factors influenced their move—drought, depletion of resources, social changes, religious and political issues, and perhaps the allure of other places. They made their way south and southeast to the better-watered country of the Rio Grande drainage and west into Arizona, where their descendants live today. This site is far from forgotten, however. Many American Indians of the Southwest today maintain deep spiritual ties with this ancestral place through oral tradition, prayer, and ceremony.

Pottery Styles

Pottery vessels and sherds tell of changing cultural influences on an enduring population. The first inhabitants made or traded pottery similar to ware found at Chaco. Vessels 6 (a bowl with lug handles), 5 (a pitcher with the effigy of a frog), and 2 (black pitcher) are representative of the first builders of Aztec. This style of pottery is characterized by hatched designs in min-

eral paint and tapered rims. The other items, found in later deposits above the Chacoan pottery, are of a style made throughout the San Juan Basin after 1200. Later inhabitants of Aztec made or traded for this pottery, identified by its solid designs drawn in vegetable paint, square rims with ticks painted on them, and comparatively thick, heavily polished walls. The bowl, 1, mug 4, kiva jar 7, and

canteens 3 and 8 are good examples of the potter's craft as practiced by Aztec's later people. Note: The items shown are not to scale.



ALL ARTIFACTS NPS

Exploring Aztec Ruins



This T-shaped doorway in the West Ruin is one of several that connect rooms directly to the central plaza.



Two bands of green sandstone—at ground level and waist high—run along a wall of the West Ruin.



The great kiva was a sanctuary of sorts, a place for the people to meet for community-wide purposes.

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Excavating the Ruins

Contrary to the name, these structures were not built by the Aztecs of central Mexico. The Aztecs in fact lived centuries after the building of this ancestral Pueblo community. Inspired by popular histories about Cortez's conquest of Mexico and thinking that Aztecs built the structures, early Anglo settlers named the site Aztec. The nearby city eventually took its name from the site.

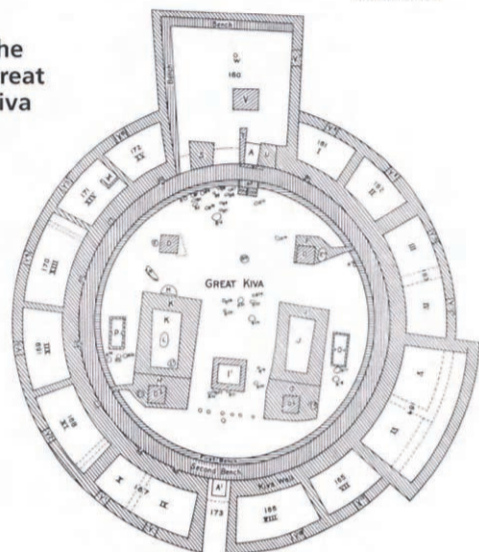
The first visitor of record was Dr. John S. Newberry, a geologist, in 1859. He found the West Ruin, the largest of the structures at Aztec, in a fair state of preservation, with walls 25 feet high in places and many rooms undisturbed. From the rubble scattered about, he concluded that a large population had once lived here. Newberry saw the ruins before vandals and looters got to them over the next half century. When the anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan investigated the site in 1878, he noted that a quarter of the pueblo's stones had been carted away by settlers for building material.

A few years later a local teacher and his students saw things their more experienced predecessors had missed. Breaking through a wall, they found a room with human burials and well preserved

objects. Other material soon vanished as local explorers broke into rooms untouched for centuries. Not until 1889, when the West Ruin passed into private ownership, did the building become relatively safe from looting. In 1916 the American Museum of Natural History began sponsoring excavations. Seven years later the West Ruin became a national monument. In 1988 the boundaries were expanded to include much of the extended Aztec community.

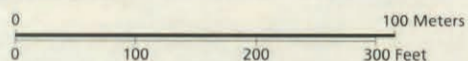
Earl H. Morris's archeological work at Aztec will be remembered as long as there is interest in the prehistoric Southwest. He was 25 when he headed up the first systematic dig at Aztec for the American Museum. He spent the next seven seasons excavating and stabilizing the West Ruin, the great kiva, and a few rooms in the East Ruin. He made many finds and was the first to propose that there were two distinct periods of occupation by the ancestral Pueblo. In the 1930s Morris returned to Aztec and supervised the reconstruction of the great kiva, based on his findings during excavation. National Park Service archeologists continued stabilization work and limited excavations after Morris moved on.

The Great Kiva



The great kiva in the West Ruin plaza was one of many kivas in the Aztec community. Morris excavated it in

1921 and rebuilt it in 1934. It is the only reconstructed great kiva in the Southwest.



- North
- Self-guiding trail
- Park area open to public (all other areas closed to public)

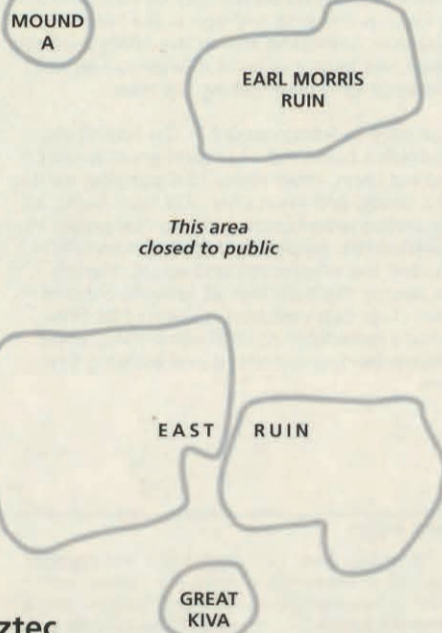
Be Careful Uneven steps and surfaces, ice or mud, low doorways, and dim lighting require caution. Stay on surfaced trail and off ruin walls.

About Your Visit The park is within the city of Aztec, near the junction of U.S. 550 and NM 516. It is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, longer in summer.

The park is closed on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

Aztec Ruins National Monument became a World Heritage Site in 1987. It is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. Please visit the National Park Service website at www.nps.gov.

More Information
Aztec Ruins National Monument
84 County Road 2900
Aztec, NM 87410-0640
505-334-6174
www.nps.gov/azru



The Ruins of Aztec

The number, variety, and massive scale of the structures concentrated in this small area are remarkable. Along with the park's mammoth West Ruin, Hubbard tri-wall site, and other large buildings are the remnants of many smaller buildings, roads, earthworks, and kivas on the nearby terrace and bottom lands. Their placement, orientation, and relationship with one another suggest that the initial builders carefully planned their community and that succeeding generations adhered to the plan.

The **West Ruin** was the largest of the great houses, with at least 400 rooms rising to three stories. It was a

public building—akin to modern public monuments, civic centers, or places of worship. Excavation revealed original roofs with centuries-old wood and vast deposits of well preserved artifacts that tell of the lives of the inhabitants.

The **Hubbard Site** is one of a handful of tri-wall structures in the Southwest. It was built of three concentric walls divided into 22 rooms encircling a kiva. This complex stood on top of two earlier structures, one of which was adobe. Construction may date from the early 1100s.

For a tour of the West Ruin and Hubbard Site, follow the self-guiding

trail that begins outside the visitor center. The other ruins are closed to the public.

Mound F and **Mound A** are also tri-walled structures. Almost twice the diameter of the Hubbard site, Mound F is the largest such structure in the Southwest.

The **East Ruin** is another multistory great house similar to its neighbor. The great kiva in its central plaza is larger than the one in the West Ruin.

Little is known about the **Earl Morris Ruin**. The archeologist may have run a few tests on the site, but if so, he left no record of his findings.