

# Aztec Ruins

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Monument  
New Mexico





Above: Aztec West

NPS

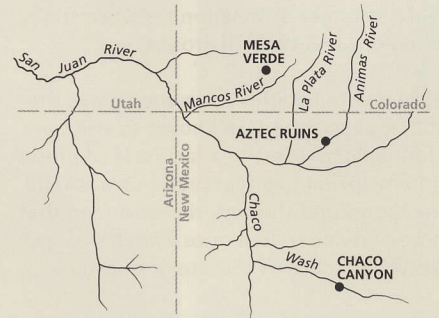
From the late 1000s to the late 1200s, people known as ancestral Puebloans planned and built this settlement. It included large public buildings, smaller structures, earthworks, and ceremonial buildings. Aztec's extended community rivaled Chaco Canyon, 55 miles south (*map at right*), which flourished between 850 and 1130.

Aztec's first inhabitants were influenced by Chacoan architecture, ceramics, and ceremonial life. At first it may have been a place that supported Chaco activities. Later it may

have been a center in its own right as Chaco Canyon's regional influence waned.

Aztec's population varied but persisted through droughts and cultural changes. Even after many generations, its final layout adhered to the original plan. The people finally left in the late 1200s.

Since that time, their descendants, European explorers, US westward expansion, and modern settlements have added new chapters to the story of this place.



Ancestral Puebloans in the Four Corners Region

## An Ancestral Community

**The River Gives Life** The Animas River flows out of the San Juan Mountains and across the plains of northwestern New Mexico. Near today's city of Aztec, early farmers took advantage of the river's year-round water. Later, ancestral Puebloan culture developed in the Four Corners region.

In the 1000s the ancestral Puebloans began building a large complex overlooking the river. When construction ceased in the late 1200s, the community consisted of great houses, kivas (circular ceremonial chambers), small residential pueblos, earthworks, and roads. The formal layout, purposeful landscape modifications, and orientation and visual relationships among buildings indicate a master design. Over a span of 200 years it reached its final expression, long after the blueprint was conceived and building began.

Most prominent are the great houses—well-planned public buildings of many connected

rooms surrounding a central plaza. By 1105 people began harvesting wood from distant sources to build the largest structure, now known as Aztec West. This great house took its final form by 1130.

**Architecture on a Grand Scale** Aztec West resembled the great houses built at Chaco and elsewhere in the Southwest. The three-story building had over 400 rooms and many kivas, including a great kiva in the plaza that was used for community events. The thick, tapering walls of the great house had a core of roughly shaped stones and mud mortar between sandstone masonry exteriors.

The ancestral Puebloans continued building during the next 150 years. They built Aztec East, a great house similar to Aztec West, and raised walls for many smaller structures. Earth pedestals elevated larger buildings, and berms marked the space surrounding them. Roads radiated across the area.

In its early years the settlement was marked by a strong Chacoan influence. It prospered as a regional administrative, trade, and ceremonial center. Its regional prominence persisted despite periodic droughts and the decline of the Chacoan social and economic system. In later years, the people of Aztec continued constructing and remodeling, now in the style of the settlement at Mesa Verde to the north (*map above*).

**Moving On** By the late 1200s people had moved from Aztec and the Four Corners region. Why did they leave? Perhaps it was drought or social, religious, or political issues. Maybe it was the allure of distant places. They moved to areas where their descendants live today: west into Arizona, south to high mesas, and east to lands nearer the Rio Grande. But this site is not forgotten. Many Native Americans maintain deep spiritual ties with this ancestral place through oral tradition, prayer, and ceremony.

## Pottery Styles Over Time

Aztec pottery shows Chacoan influence in the early decades. The pitcher with the human effigy **1** and the bowl with handles **2** show Chacoan characteristics like tapered rims and hatched designs.

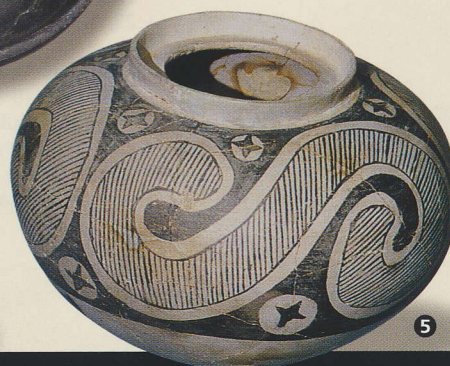
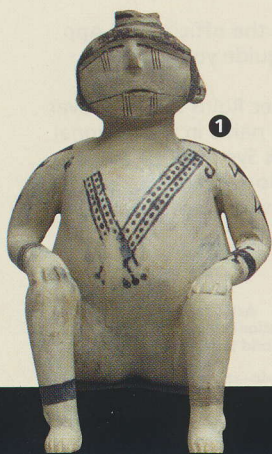
Bowl **3** is a type known as Aztec

Black, which was influenced by the Mogollon culture to the south.

Later items used designs common to the Four Corners region: bowl **4**, kiva jar **5**, mug **6**, can-tees **7** and **8**. Mesa Verde influence is shown in the solid

designs, square rims, and thick, polished walls.

*Note:* Items shown are not to scale.



1, 3, 6—AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, DIVISION OF ANTHROPOLOGY; 2, 4, 5, 7, 8—NPS

# Exploring Aztec Ruins



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



Two bands of green stone run along the western wall. Their purpose remains a mystery.



The Great Kiva was a central gathering place for ceremonies and possibly community events.

ALL IMAGES—NPS

## Excavating the Ruins

**Why Aztec?** Don't be fooled by the name. These structures were not built by the Aztec people of Mexico, but by ancestral Puebloan people centuries before the Aztec empire. The name "Aztec Ruins" traces back to Spanish maps of the 1800s. However, archeologists have found trade goods connected with central Mexico. Future research may reveal a stronger connection between the two regions and cultural groups.

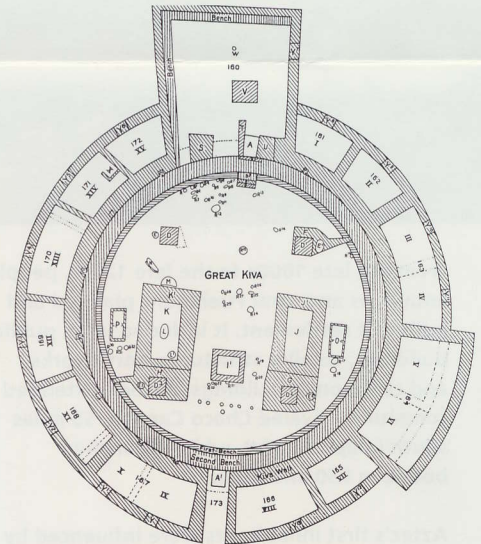
In 1859 geologist John S. Newberry was the first European American known to visit here. He found Aztec West in a fair state of preservation, with walls 25 feet high in places and many rooms undisturbed. He concluded that a large population had once lived here, and he recorded much of the site at that time.

Anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan investigated the site in 1878. He estimated that a quarter of the pueblo's stones had been carted away

by recent settlers for building material. A few years later a local teacher and students dug through walls and found intact rooms, including a room with human burials and well-preserved objects. Artifacts soon vanished as others broke into rooms untouched for centuries. Not until 1889, when Aztec West passed into private ownership, did the site become relatively safe from looting.

In 1916 the American Museum of Natural History sponsored an excavation by Earl H. Morris. He spent seven seasons excavating and stabilizing Aztec West, the Great Kiva (*right*), and a few rooms in Aztec East. In the 1930s he returned to supervise reconstruction of the Great Kiva.

In 1923 President Warren G. Harding designated this site a national monument "for the enlightenment and culture of the nation." In 1987 it was declared a World Heritage Site.



**The Great Kiva in Aztec West was one of many kivas in this community. Archeologist Earl Morris excavated it in 1921 and rebuilt it in 1934.**

## Today's Landscape

**Aztec West** This is the largest great house, with three stories and at least 400 rooms. Excavation revealed wood roofs and artifacts.

**Tri-Wall Structures** Built of three concentric walls, tri-walls are rare. Three are here. The walls of **Hubbard** encircled a kiva with 22 rooms. **Mound A** and **Mound F** were about twice its size. Mound F

may have had a fourth wall, which would make it the only known quad-wall structure.

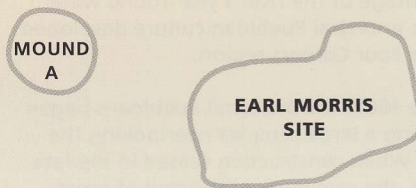
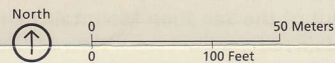
**Aztec East** Built after 1130, this three-story great house had 200 to 300 rooms. Its Great Kiva is larger than the kiva in Aztec West.

**Earl Morris Site** Morris conducted a hurried excavation of this great house after hearing a road was planned for the site. His work resulted in

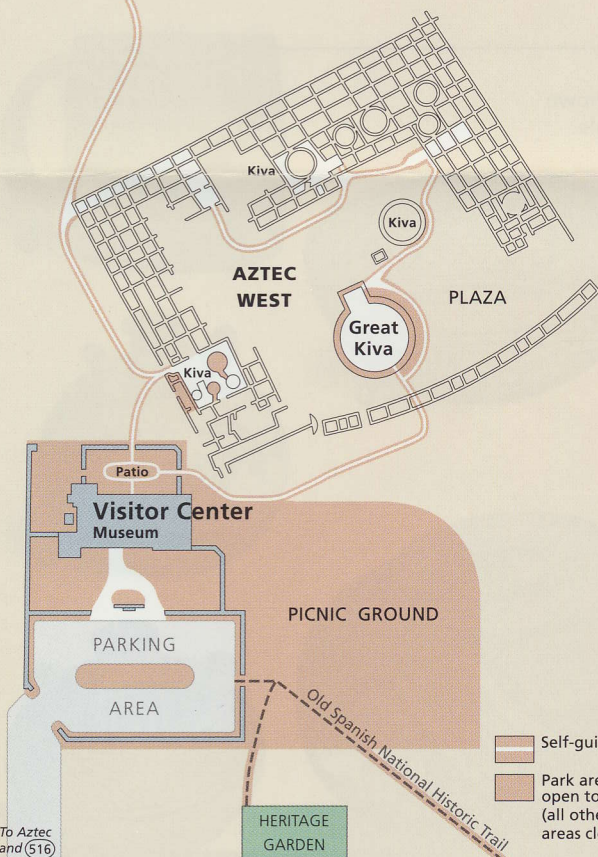
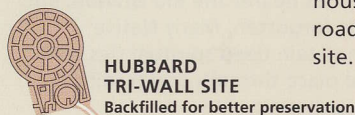
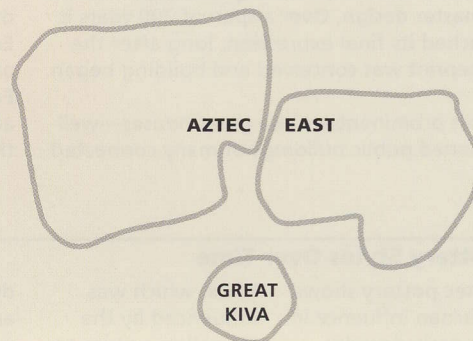
the road being moved. However, he left no record of his findings.

**Old Spanish Trail** In 1829, Antonio Armijo used this part of what is now a national historic trail. He was traveling from New Mexico to California.

**Heritage Garden** Modern squash, corn, beans, and other edibles are descended from ancestral Puebloan plants.



*This area closed to public*



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

## Planning Your Visit

**Getting Here** The park is in the city of Aztec, New Mexico, near the junction of US 550 and NM 516 (Aztec Blvd.).

**Visitor Center** Start here for information, exhibits, and publications. Open 9 am to 5 pm daily. Closed Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

**Activities** Take a self-guiding trail to Aztec West and Hubbard Tri-Wall Site. Other ruins are closed to the public. For information about other

activities and programs, contact the park or visit the park website.

**Safety and Regulations** Watch out for uneven steps and surfaces, ice or mud, low doorways, and dim lighting. • Stay on the surfaced trail. • Do not climb on ruin walls. • Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features in the park. • For firearms regulations check the park website.

**Accessibility** We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to the visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website.

**More Information**  
Aztec Ruins National Monument  
725 Ruins Rd.  
Aztec, NM 87410  
505-334-6174  
[www.nps.gov/azur](http://www.nps.gov/azur)

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**Aztec Ruins National Monument World Heritage Site**