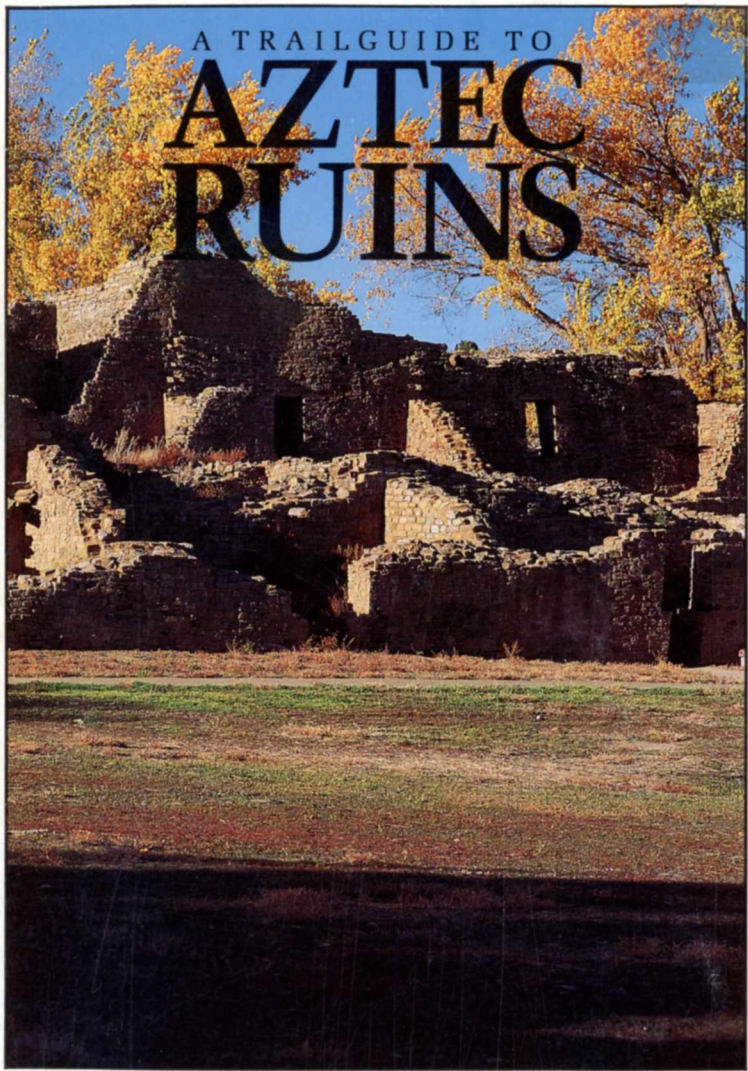


A TRAILGUIDE TO
**AZTEC
RUINS**



Aztec Ruins National Monument, New Mexico, was established in 1923 and covers 320 acres. Early Euro-American settlers erroneously assumed the people who built these structures were Aztecs, hence the name of the site and of the modern town of Aztec.

Description of trail

Length—400 yards

Time required—30-40 minutes

Terrain—mostly paved and accessible to wheelchairs, with some steps and low doorways.

Rules

Stay on the trail. Climbing on walls or the ladders in the Great Kiva is prohibited. Do not disturb natural or cultural material.

Warnings

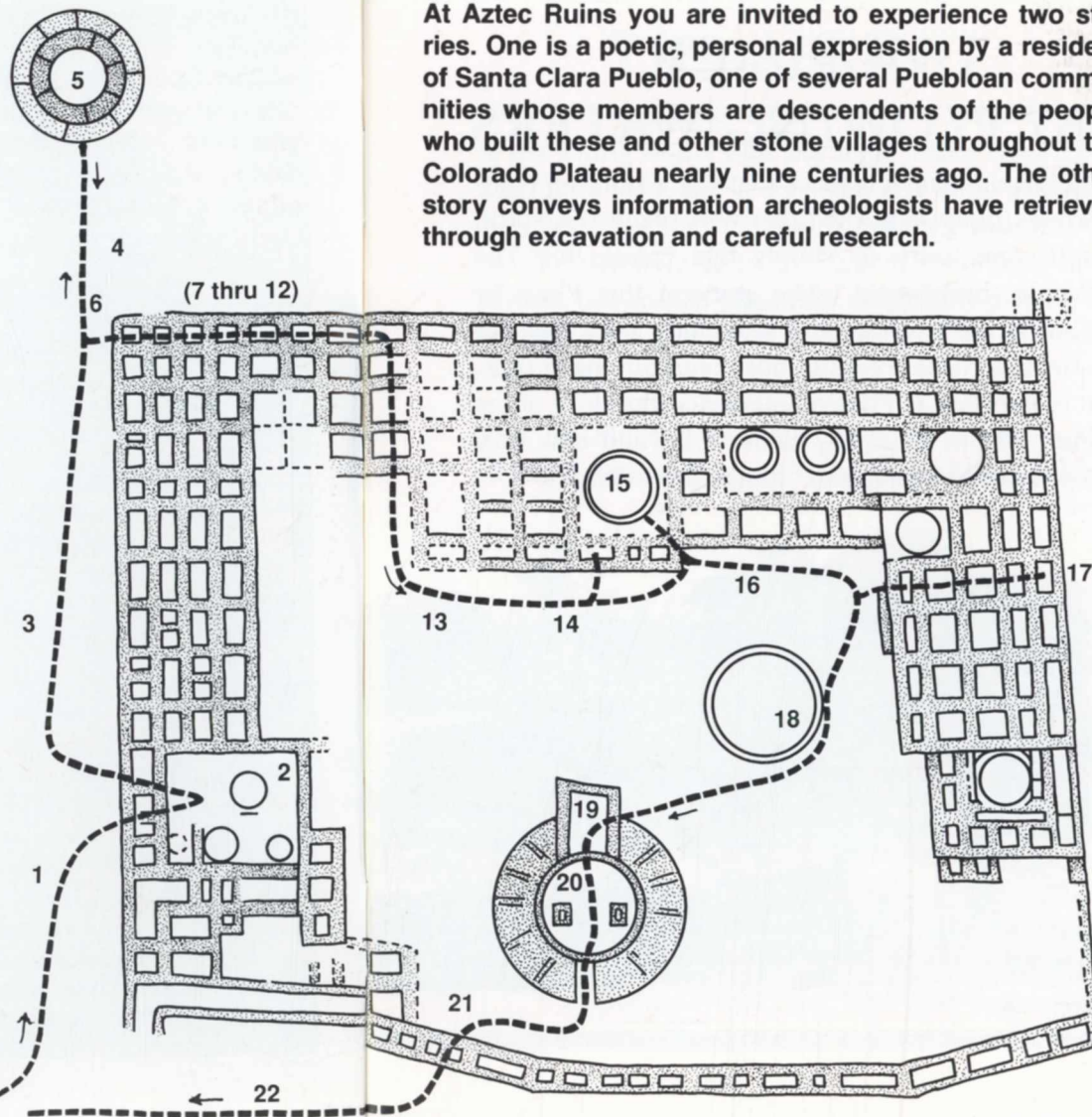
Caution! Be aware of uneven steps and surfaces, and low doorways. Wear proper walking shoes. Watch for ice, snow, and lightning.

How to use this guide

Numbered stops along the trail correspond to numbered stops in the trail guide.

Published by Southwest Parks and Monuments Association in cooperation with the National Park Service.

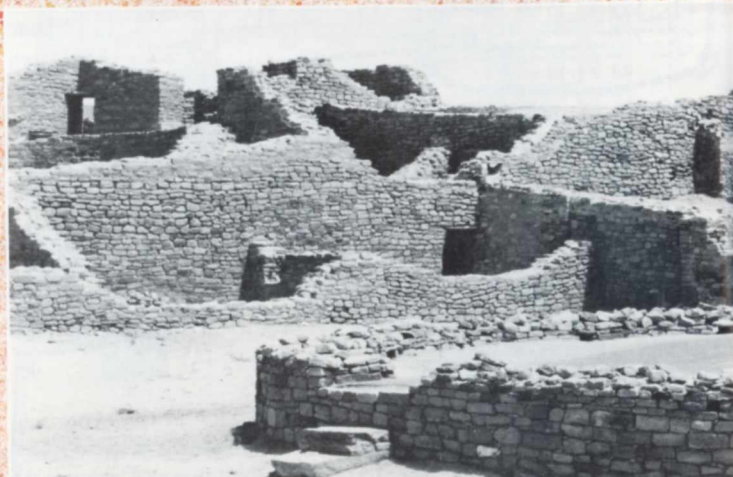
Visitor Center
You are here



At Aztec Ruins you are invited to experience two stories. One is a poetic, personal expression by a resident of Santa Clara Pueblo, one of several Puebloan communities whose members are descendants of the people who built these and other stone villages throughout the Colorado Plateau nearly nine centuries ago. The other story conveys information archeologists have retrieved through excavation and careful research.

A PLACE BY FLOWING WATERS

To Pueblo People, a place that has a story—a place where things happened that were about life, spirit, and community—is simply that “place that The People think about.” The story of this Place by Flowing Waters is rooted in a larger story that has oriented Pueblo People since the beginning of time. It is the story of Pueblo Emergence, the story of the First People, how they came to be, and how they journeyed as a people to “find and be with life.”



West Ruin

THE ASKING

Before the beginning of this time, The People lived in the Third World. Life was hard. There was sickness, little food, and it was cold and dark. The Elders heard footsteps on the roof of their world, and became determined to find out if there was life beyond. In a special place they prayerfully planted a fir tree, which grew until it almost touched the roof of the Third World.

Next, the Elders constructed a ladder of reeds and placed it against the tree. They climbed the ladder,



Photo by George A. Grant, National Park Service, 1946

□ and made a hole in the roof with a sharp reed pole. □
Then they sent Water Bird to see what this new world was made of. When Water Bird returned, she sang of a world of beautiful streams, lakes, mountains, plains, dry lands, other birds, plants, animals, and much more.

The Elders gathered the People together and, with the help of the Sacred Clowns and First Man and First Woman, they led the People through the Earth's Navel into this, the Fourth World. As they emerged they stepped onto a spiraling Rainbow Path. They were greeted by the rising Sun and setting Moon, Bear and Deer, evergreen trees, life-giving plants, and mountains and waters, all of which gave them guidance and orientation in this new world.

Around the Earth's Navel they gathered and, with their feet firmly planted on the Rainbow Path, they "asked for life." Then they divided into four groups, each with their clans, chosen leaders, and special bundles of gifts. Together they recited the story of their emergence, knowing that this was the story they would always share as they journeyed in this new world. And so, each group traveled to one of the four directions to find their life from this "place that the People think about," this Center, the Earth's Navel. □

STOP 1

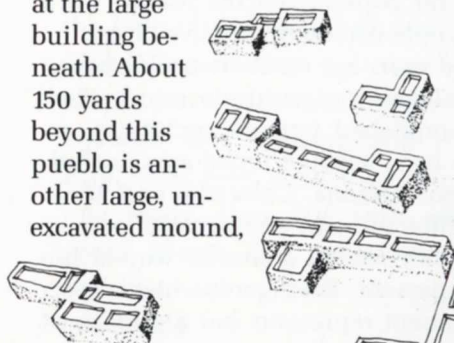
Early settlers mistakenly surmised that only people of the famous Aztec Empire in Mexico could have created these striking buildings. Later archeological study confirmed that the builders were ancestors of the Puebloan peoples. Archeologists adopted and popularized the Navajo word Anasazi to refer to the people who built and lived here.

About two thousand years ago nomadic people began to live year round in villages and cultivate crops. They eventually became accomplished farmers, architects, artisans, and traders. They lived across a broad area, including parts of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah. Despite many regional differences in architecture, pottery styles, and other traits, they shared a similar way of life that enabled them to cope with the rigorous high desert environment. This settlement represents but a portion of the long history of life in this region.



STOP 2

Early exploration here focused on this pueblo, the West Ruin. For centuries, only a few sandstone walls jutted above a brush-covered mound, hinting at the large building beneath. About 150 yards beyond this pueblo is another large, unexcavated mound,

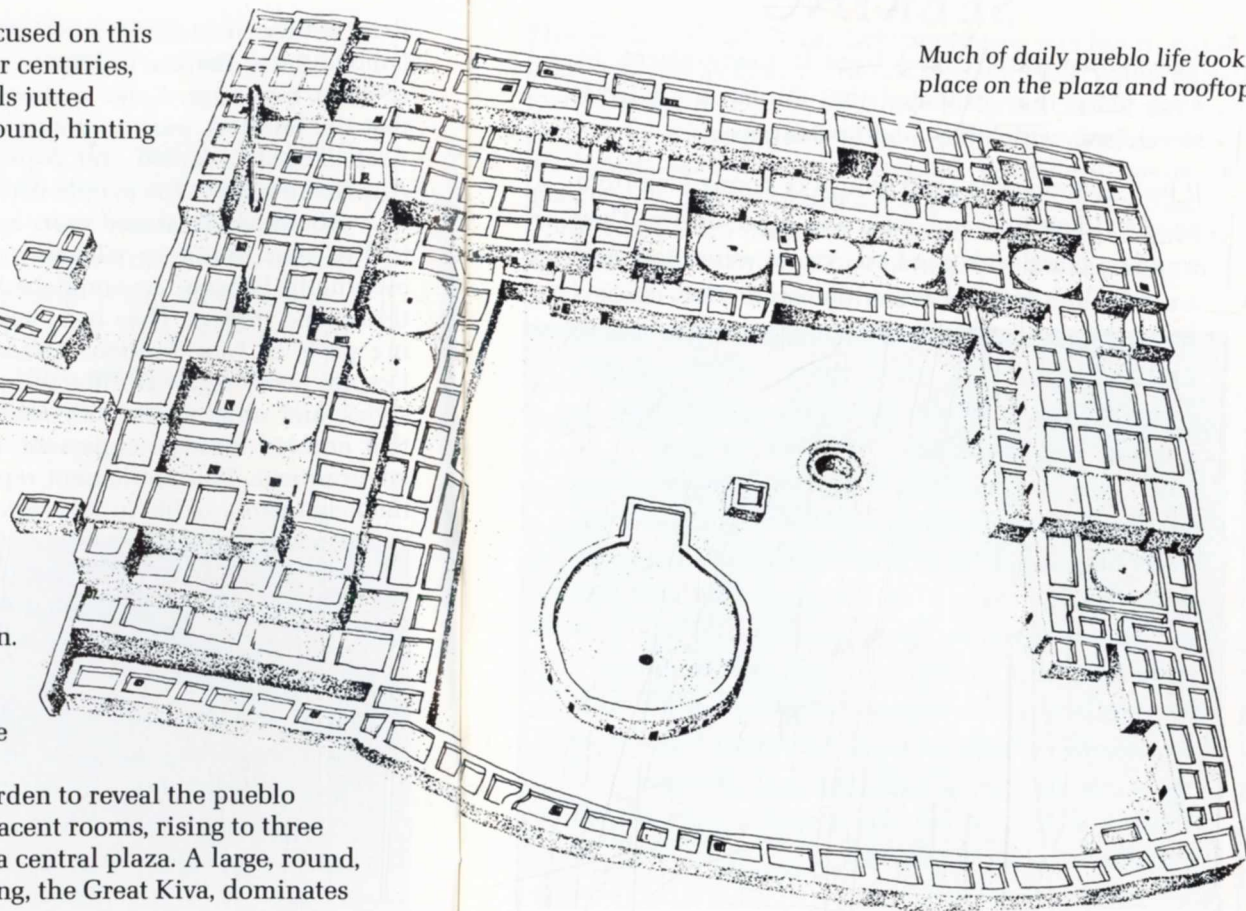


which is closed to the public. This East Ruin looks much as the West Ruin did before excavation.

Archeologist Earl Morris began the first scientific excavations here in 1916. He and his crew removed the huge overburden to reveal the pueblo before you. About 450 adjacent rooms, rising to three stories in places, enclose a central plaza. A large, round, semi-subterranean building, the Great Kiva, dominates

the plaza. Within a few miles are scores of other structures built about the same time as this pueblo, indicating an extensive local population.

Much of daily pueblo life took place on the plaza and rooftops.



THE SEEKING

The People traveled and lived in many places. In each place they recreated that Center, the Earth's Navel, from which they had first emerged.

It was customary to send groups of young men from an old village to search for a new place to live. They sought a place with good sources of water, soil, and areas for hunting and gathering plants. They chose a site with combinations of qualities such as ample sunlight, mountains, lakes, rivers, valleys, or canyons. The Elders of the first people of this Place by Flowing Waters then decided that this was to be "their place." Clan leaders gathered stones representing their families and laid them in a pile at the place that would become the "navel," or the Center, of their new village. They sprinkled cornmeal over the pile of stones as they "asked for life" and lent their breath to the birth of their new community. The People gathered more stones and wood from the nearby mountains, and, with mud made from the earth of "their place," they built the walls and structures that define the special spaces of this Place by Flowing Waters.

STOP 3

The pueblo builders carried sandstone blocks by hand from quarries at least a mile away. They used stone hammers, mauls, and pecking stones to break and dress the sandstone, which in this area is difficult to fracture into level surfaces. Notice the unusual horizontal bands of green stone, present in just a few other walls in the pueblo. Outer walls were probably plastered with mud, obscuring any decorative stonework beneath, but also shielding the mud mortar from the eroding forces of rain and snow.



THE UNDERSTANDING

This place was one of many in this valley. It was common for many small communal villages to be built first. In time, one rooted itself and became a central village by virtue of its people, trade, and ceremonial activity. This Place by Flowing Waters was destined to become such a Mother Pueblo because of its special spirit. Here you are retracing part of a mythic journey. At each stop, you glimpse a part of the spirit of this place and the life and being of The People who lived here.

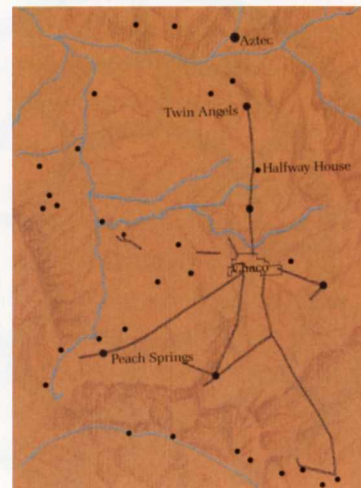


Stone tools include grinding rock and axe (handle added in modern times)

STOP 4

The north wall of the pueblo stretches 360 feet, longer than a football field. Most of the pueblo was built between A.D. 1111 and A.D. 1115. Its architecture is similar to pueblos in Chaco Canyon, fifty miles south of here.

Even Earl Morris recognized a connection between these areas. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Chaco Canyon was the center of a large network of communities that archeologists call "outliers." Aztec is one of more than one hundred outliers scattered throughout a broad region. Many are connected to Chaco and each other by "roads"; several road segments are near Aztec. The outliers and the nature of their relationship to Chaco Canyon are subjects of much archeological research and debate. The designers and/or builders of Aztec may have been from Chaco itself, or a local population may have been influenced by people from Chaco.

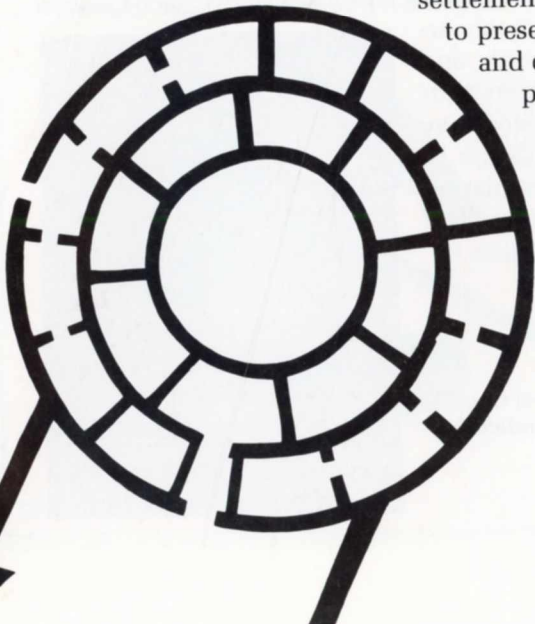


Map shows system of Chacoan outliers. Dots indicate settlements.

STOP 5

You can trace remnants of the upper walls of an unusual tri-wall structure, one of a handful found in the Southwest. The spaces between three concentric circular walls were partitioned into a series of small rooms, eight in the inner ring, fourteen in the outer. Most compartments were accessible only by roof hatchways. The central space is called a kiva, and is marked by its own circular wall. Archeologists generally agree it was used ceremonially. Some suggest that the locations of the three tri-walls found at Aztec and their relationship to the many other buildings were important symbols in the “ritual landscape” of the

settlement. Maintenance to preserve the exposed and crumbling walls proved too costly here. The site was backfilled to halt its deterioration.



RESONANCE

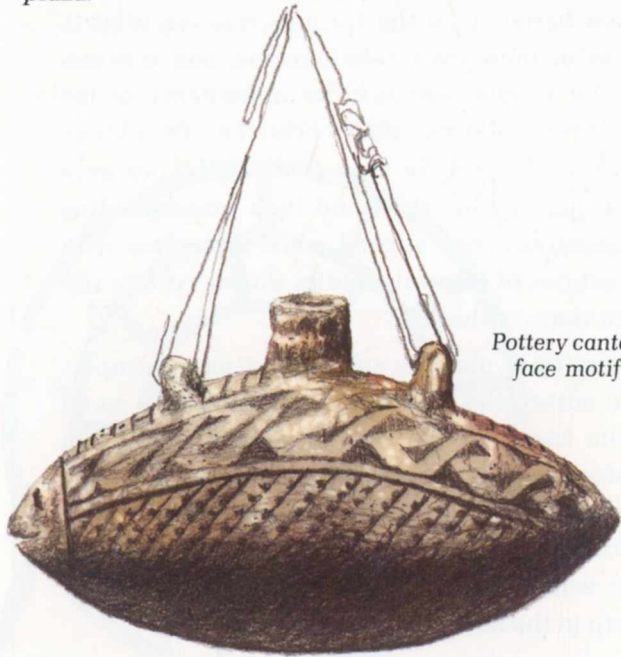
The People celebrated the mystery of life in their kivas and their plaza. They sang ancient songs timed to the beat of their drums . . . and their hearts. They danced in honor and prayer to the animals and plants whose life they shared in this place. Through their rituals they strove to establish a “resonance” with the Earth and the Cosmos. They believed harmony in the Cosmos was essential to recreate in their lives, relationships, and community. The People watched the movements of the Sun, Moon, planets, and constellations closely throughout the year, for these heavenly bodies were part of their mythic story and their understanding of themselves. They aligned some structures with the positions of heavenly bodies during certain important times of the year.

Exact timing of planting and harvesting was important to ensure the well being of The People, so an intimate knowledge of the movements of the Sun and Moon was required to maintain the complex ceremonial cycles that harmonized The People with the Cosmos. Spiritual vigilance ensured that The People would “remember to remember” their relationship to the natural order of the universe.

STOP
6

This doorway and the next few you will pass through are modern, not original. Pothunters in the 1880s punched holes through these walls, looted the contents within, and destroyed valuable information that might have been revealed to us.

The trail passes through the inner rooms to the plaza.



Pottery canteen with
face motif

LIVING

The inner rooms are intimate spaces. During the winter, mothers prepared food while children slept, dreamed, and played. Grandmothers and grandfathers told stories by the light of the fire. Men and boys wove cotton cloth and yucca fiber blankets, prepared hunting arrows, or made ceremonial clothing and jewelry. Women, young and old, made pottery or ground corn on stone metates. There was a natural rhythm to their life, an order which kept time with the days, the seasons, and sacred cycles of nature.

Imagine living here at that time. Smell the aroma of corn and venison stew simmering in clay pots over a fire of cedar and pinyon wood. Feel the presence of The People.



Yucca fiber sandal

STOP
7

These original ceilings have widely spaced spruce, fir, or pine beams set into solid masonry walls that provide support for the next story. These timbers were probably carried from higher elevations at least twenty miles to the north. The overlying cottonwood poles, obtained nearby, supported a layer of thin splints of juniper or rush matting. Finally, a heavy deposit of tamped mud topped this layer, forming the floor of the upper story.

STOP
8

Imagine how dark these rooms along the north wall of the pueblo were. The small vents set high in the corners and frequently aligned from room to room allowed for limited ventilation and light. Remains found included broken pottery, cloth fragments, bone tools, worn fiber sandals, and bits of matting. These rooms were similar to our garages, basements, and closets, where things are stored and discarded but daily activities do not occur.

Flute, gilsonite snake, shell



STOP
9

In this room at least a dozen persons were buried. The dead had been carefully prepared with shrouds of feather or cotton cloth; some were wrapped with rush matting. Offerings of pottery, coiled baskets, sandals, sticks, shell beads, and other items accompanied them.

Earl Morris found many burials within the pueblo walls—in shallow pits beneath floors, in trash mounds and storage bins, and in rooms modified into burial chambers. Some rooms contained one individual, but others became a tomb for many.

STOP
10

For two centuries, inhabitants modified and changed the uses of rooms to suit their needs. Morris thought this pueblo housed about one thousand people. Recent archaeologists note that, during the pueblo's later years, many rooms were used for storage, refuse, toilets, work areas, and burial chambers—not for daily living. The bulk of the population probably lived in other pueblos, although 200–300 people may have lived here at any one time during the site's history.

STOP
11

Across the closed door is an original mat of willows sewn with yucca cord. The pueblo dwellers did not have hinged doors; they used mats, hides, stone slabs, or feather blankets to block drafty doorways. Here, the mat and a framework of small, plastered poles reduced the size of the doorway.

STOP
12

Early researchers likened this pueblo and similar large ones to modern residential apartment houses. Many today disagree with this analogy. Aztec may have been a ceremonial center, used intermittently or seasonally for special activities. If so, residential use was less significant than first thought.

THE SHARING

As you look to the center of the plaza, imagine you are a spectator at one of the ritual dances. Drummers emerge from the Great Kiva just as the Sun begins to rise. From the rooftops the ceremonial clowns start to sing and call out, "They are coming, the Clouds and Rainbow are coming, the Deer and Buffalo are coming, the Corn Maidens are coming, they are all coming!"

One by one the dancers emerge from the kiva. They line up in the plaza facing east, welcoming the Sun and ready to dance, male and female—the two lines of human life. Slowly, the drummers begin to drum and chant their prayer of life. The men, adorned in cotton kilts, macaw feather headdresses, and cowrie shell belts, lift their feet in unison to the beat of the drums, keeping time with their gourd rattles and the beating of their hearts. The women, in their ceremonial mantas, lift their feet gently in time with that feminine rhythm of life that complements, creates, and nourishes. They invite all who are present "to remember to remember" who they are and where they have come from, and to remember their relationship to each other, their ancestors, and the Earth Mother.

STOP
13

Although this plaza may appear unremarkable, for Earl Morris, it helped explain the sequence of occupation here. Digging beneath the plaza surface, he found round structures, some with thick deposits of broken pottery. The pottery designs in the lower, older stratum resembled Chaco Canyon pottery. The pottery in the upper, more recent layers resembled pottery found in the Mesa Verde region, about forty miles northwest of here.

There were two distinct occupations. The initial Chacoan period lasted through the first half of the twelfth century. During the thirteenth century, people who shared traits with those in the Mesa Verde region used the pueblo. They may have been local inhabitants who never left the area, but who were influenced by the northern, Mesa Verde people.

STOP
14

Large, T-shaped doorways commonly open onto the plaza. Their distinctive shape may have been symbolic and/or functional. This row of rooms parallel to the trail was added later, possibly during the Mesa Verde occupation. Note the differences in the masonry styles between the inner and outer walls.



STOP
15

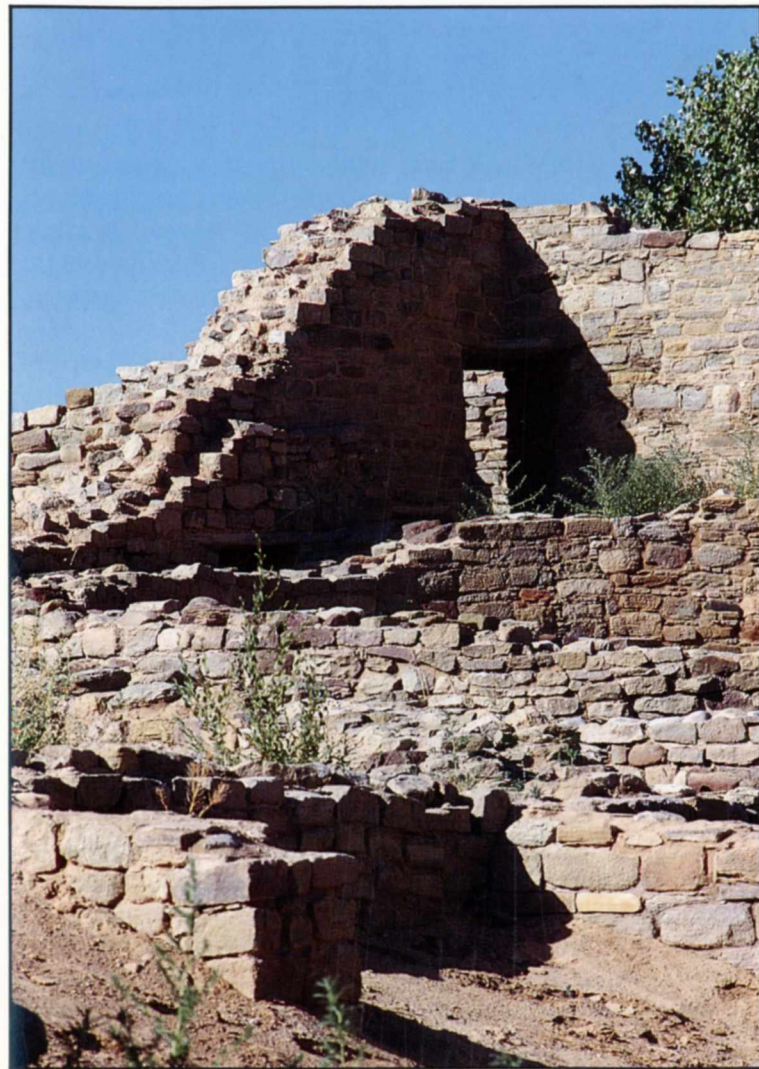
You have probably noticed several round rooms with special features in them. Similar rooms—called kivas—are used by Pueblo people today for sacred rituals and other special activities. For many years archeologists assumed that these rooms were used as kivas are today. Now some think that they were used for domestic purposes as well. Archeologists are not certain who of the inhabitants—male or female, young or old—used these rooms.

They were entered by a roof hatch that also allowed smoke from the central hearth to escape. A ventilator shaft worked like a chimney in reverse, drawing in fresh air to feed the fire. A stone slab or low wall placed between the hearth and ventilator shaft deflected the fresh air and reflected heat from the fire. Low pillars that rested on the bench circling the wall supported the roof.

Compare this round kiva to the rectangular room on the other side of the trail that the Mesa Verdeans remodeled into a kiva.

STOP
16

Look along the upper stories for the three doorways that connect rooms at their corners. These are rare and unique to Chacoan architecture. Including them in the structure was risky because they reduce the stability of the walls. The trail continues through a series of rooms in the east wing, then doubles back to the plaza.



STOP
17

Architectural changes from remodeling, the two occupations, and recent preservation work are evident throughout the pueblo. For example, on the wall to your left the style of masonry abruptly changes, possibly due to repairs made by later occupants. On the opposite wall a vertical line marks a sealed doorway.

The National Park Service has stabilized walls to delay deterioration. Workers backfilled some rooms, replaced eroded mortar and missing stones, rebuilt portions of walls, and treated original wood. Many years of stabilization have altered the architecture and erased details of prehistoric masonry. Although the building's layout and form have changed little, in many places the masonry and other features of the stabilized walls do not accurately reflect the work of the original builders.

STOP
18

The timbers resting upon one another in this kiva demonstrate the lower part of a domed, cribbed roof. A cribbed roof uses many more large timbers than a horizontal roof. Some archeologists believe most Chacoan kivas had flat roofs.

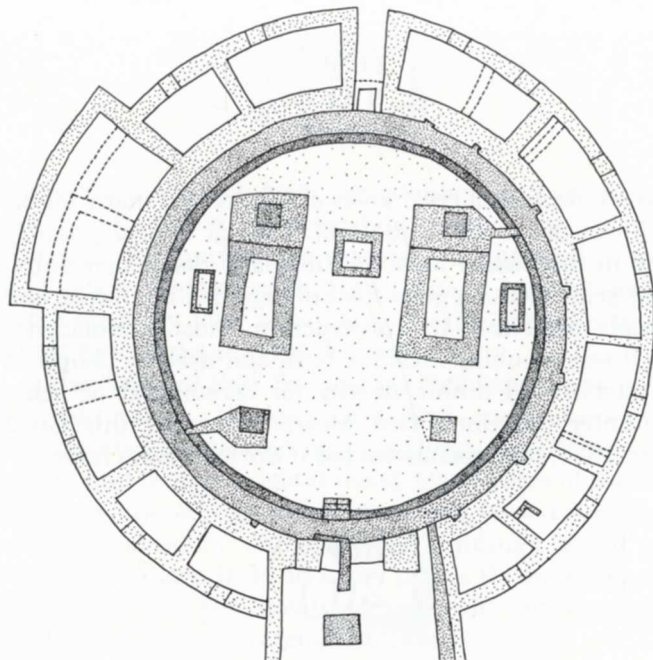
STOP
19

There are dozens of great kivas at Chaco, and many others exist throughout the Southwest. This is one of possibly fifteen in the nearby area, an unusually dense concentration of great kivas. A great deal of organization, labor, and materials went into its construction. Most archeologists agree it was a public building, built and used by people of this pueblo and others nearby for ceremonial or other community functions. Earl Morris excavated this Great Kiva in 1921, then reconstructed it thirteen years later.

STOP
20

Morris uncovered only remnants of the original building from which he based this reconstruction. Fifteen surface rooms encircle the central chamber. Their purpose is unclear—Morris found very few artifacts in them. Each had an exterior doorway to the plaza. Morris suspected the presence of the interior doors between the rooms and the center. Although he included them in the reconstruction, they may not have existed, or were wall niches instead.

Four massive pillars of alternating masonry and horizontal poles held up the ceiling beams, which in turn supported an estimated ninety-five-ton roof. Each pillar rested on four shaped stone discs, weighing about 375



pounds apiece. These discs are of limestone, which came from mountains at least forty miles away.

The colors are based on bits of reddish and white-washed plaster found clinging to the original walls. Charred wood beams on the kiva floor indicated the roof had burned, and also guided Morris in its reconstruction. Most archeologists now think the original roof was lower.

The purpose of the large floor vaults on both sides of the central firepit is not certain. They may have been covered with wood planks and served as foot drums. Perhaps they were used for germinating seedlings, as similar features are employed in some pueblos today.

THE CENTER

At the very beginning of this Place by Flowing Waters, The People gathered to build a Great Kiva. In so doing, they enacted the joining of the primal pairing of nature that bonded them as one people, male and female: Sky and Earth, sun and moon, winter and summer. The Great Kiva represented the First House created by The People upon their emergence from the Earth's Navel. The Great Kiva was the place where all the clans met to celebrate that First Story. The Great Kiva was the center of the Cosmos, where the six sacred directions symbolically came together, where The People reconnected with their spiritual and mythic origins and were nourished by the spiritual Center, the Earth's Navel.

Imagine the Great Kiva filled with The People of this Place by Flowing Waters as they awaited the first rays of sunlight on the summer solstice. This was a sacred event, the beginning of a new cycle of life celebrated by all people. It was a time of renewal and thanksgiving. As you sit in the Great Kiva, you too are participating in this Celebration of Life. You have walked in the footsteps of The People of this Place by Flowing Waters. Remember that "place that The People think about."

STOP
21

This arc of single rooms, common in Chacoan pueblos, enclosed the plaza on the south side. Cobbles are plentiful in the area. They were used also for wall foundations. Stabilization has obscured other materials used in these walls, including sandstone blocks and sticks laid horizontally and vertically in copious mud.

STOP
22

There are many questions about these people that archeologists cannot answer. For example, why did they leave? It was common for the people to use a pueblo for a generation or two, and then move on. But by A.D. 1300 they had departed not only Aztec but the entire San Juan Basin.

Early archeologists believed invaders drove them from their homeland. This theory lost support as researchers looked more to the environment for an explanation. An extensive drought from 1276 to 1299 certainly influenced their lives, although they had endured severe droughts before. Added to drought was an overuse of natural resources. After two hundred years in one place, how productive could their fields be? How much farther did they have to travel to gather firewood, collect building materials, and hunt game? Even with further archeological research, explanations for the people's exodus and many

other questions remain tentative—and elusive. Researchers may never fully understand the lives of these prehistoric inhabitants of the Southwest.

Archeologists do not know for certain where the Aztec residents went. It is likely they and others in this region moved eastward to the Rio Grande Valley, where they established and joined thriving settlements. Their Puebloan descendants live today in the pueblos of Ácoma, Taos, Zia, Santo Domingo, Hopi, Zuni, and others, where they continue a rich culture influenced by their ancestors.



Return to the visitor center to learn more from exhibits and National Park Service rangers.

Southwest Parks and Monuments Association was founded in 1938 to aid and promote the educational and scientific activities of the National Park Service. As a nonprofit organization authorized by Congress, it makes interpretive material available to park visitors by sale or free distribution. All net proceeds support the interpretive and research programs of the National Park Service.

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