

A Trail Guide to
AZTEC RUINS
NATIONAL MONUMENT



Aztec Ruins National Monument was established in 1923 and became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987.

Description of trail

Length: ½ mile

Time required: 30–40 minutes

Most of the trail is paved and accessible to wheelchairs, with some steps and low doorways.

Rules

Stay on the trail. Climbing on walls or ladders is prohibited. Do not disturb natural or cultural material. Dogs are not allowed on the trail.

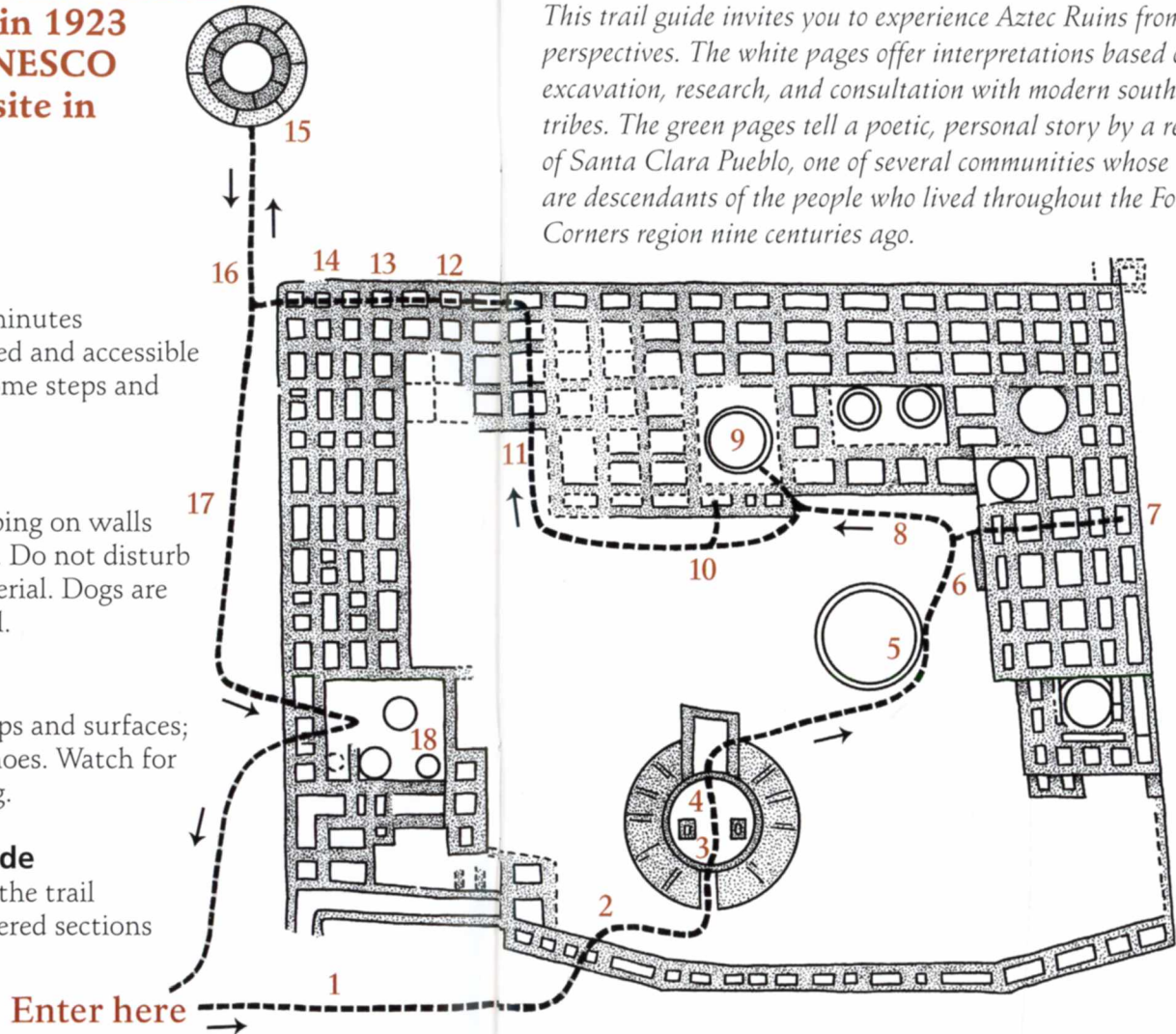
Warnings

Be aware of uneven steps and surfaces; wear proper walking shoes. Watch for ice, snow, and lightning.

How to use this guide

Numbered stops along the trail correspond with numbered sections in the trail guide.

This trail guide invites you to experience Aztec Ruins from two perspectives. The white pages offer interpretations based on excavation, research, and consultation with modern southwestern tribes. The green pages tell a poetic, personal story by a resident of Santa Clara Pueblo, one of several communities whose members are descendants of the people who lived throughout the Four Corners region nine centuries ago.



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.”



Aztec West

1 The Aztecs never lived here. Aztec Ruins was built by ancestors of American Indian people who are still living in the Southwest today. The site got its name because early Spanish explorers traveling north from Mexico commonly used the term “Aztec” when naming many of the ancient sites they encountered. The name was later popularized in literature during the 1800s. Although different tribes have their own names for their ancestors, the ancient builders of Aztec Ruins are generally called “ancestral Puebloan people.”

Great Houses like Aztec Ruins were the culmination of thousands of years of Pueblo history that included hunting, gathering, and eventually farming in what is now the Four Corners region. Archeologists call this period the “Chaco Phenomenon.” It was a time of unity and broad artistic expression among the Pueblo people. From 850 to 1250 CE (Common Era) Great Houses in Chaco Canyon and across the region served as community centers for trade, politics, agriculture, and ceremony. Builders from Chaco migrated to the banks of the Animas River around 1100 CE, joining the growing community known today as Aztec Ruins. They may have intended it to be a colony of Chaco or a new regional center in its own right.



*Aerial view of
Aztec Ruins*

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, and made a hole in the roof with a sharp reed pole. They then 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 into 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 the 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.



Canada geese on the Animas River



Aztec East

2 People would have entered the Great House here, through an arc of single-story rooms and into the plaza. From here you can see the extent of this grand, pre-planned community. Its walls still tower three stories tall in places. The majority of this building was completed in only 30 years. While it continued to serve the people for 200 years, its primary function may have changed over time, from community center to living space.

Look to your right and spot the remains of Aztec East, an unexcavated Great House that is similar in size to the building in front of you. Together with several other structures, they would have served as a ceremonial and economic center for the surrounding villages, where most people lived.

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 stone 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 places of this Place by Flowing Waters.

3 Great Kivas like this one served as the religious core of the Great House. Archeologists believe Great Kivas were public buildings used by people in the surrounding community. They may have brought together different clans for ceremonies and other functions. Great Kivas were usually in the plaza or near the Great House where everyone in the community could see them.

Though not all Great Kivas are identical, they share a number of common features, including large size, a central fire pit, four pillars, and floor vaults. The use of the vaults is unclear. The ancient people may have laid planks of wood across the vaults to use them as foot drums.

4 This Great Kiva was excavated by Earl Morris in 1921 and reconstructed under his direction in 1934. The fifteen surface rooms surrounding the central chamber are a unique feature of the structure. The purpose of the rooms is unknown.

They may have been for the spirits of the ancestors, individual clans or societies, spectators, or ceremonial preparation.

Great Kiva after excavation in 1934



THE CENTER

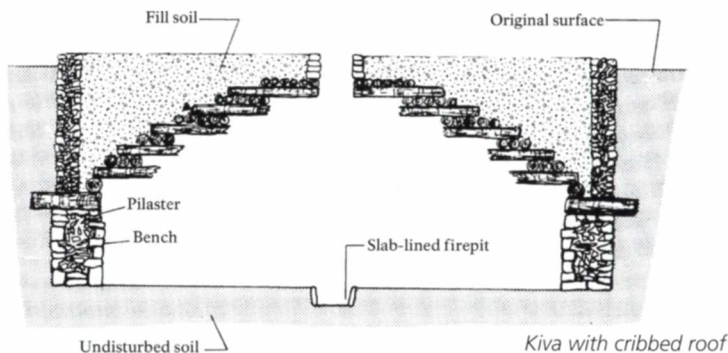
At the very beginning of this Place by Flowing Waters, The People gathered to build a Great Kiva. In so doing, they enacted the joining of the primal pairing of nature that bonded them as one people, male and female: Sky and Earth, sun and moon, winter and summer. The Great Kiva represented the First 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."

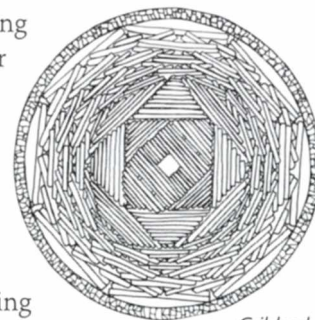
Four massive pillars of alternating masonry and horizontal poles held up the ceiling beams. Each pillar rested on four weighty limestone discs brought in from at least 30 miles away. Supporting the ninety-five-ton roof was a difficult feat of engineering, both when the Great Kiva was originally built and when it was reconstructed. Fragments of charred wood on the floor indicated that the roof had burned; these pieces helped guide Morris during the reconstruction.

Morris found bits of reddish and white-washed plaster clinging to the original walls, as well as in the excavated material. He chose the paint color for the reconstruction based on these remnants of plaster. This color scheme is found throughout the ancestral Puebloan world.

5 The round room in front of you was another kind of kiva or ceremonial chamber. Kivas like this may have been used by clans or other groups such as medicine or religious societies. Most communities had many smaller kivas, but only one or two Great Kivas. The roof in this kiva was



domed (or cribbed) with timbers resting one upon another, a common style for kiva roofs. The timbers on the low pilasters are from a reconstructed roof that has since been removed; they help to illustrate how the roof was constructed. Descendants of the ancestral Puebloan people describe this kind of construction as representing a basket, which is associated with the sky above. People entered the kiva through a hatchway in the roof.



*Cribbed
roof viewed
from inside kiva*

6 Look along the second story for two of the four doorways in Aztec West that connect rooms at their corners. These corner doorways are rare and unique to Chacoan Great Houses. Including them in the structure was risky because they reduced the strength of the walls. Why would the builders have risked the stability of their work for these doorways? Can we assume they held an important meaning to the ancestral Puebloan people?



*Corner doorway
in the fall*

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.



Corrugated pot

7 Ancestral Puebloan people modified their communities over time just as we change our homes and cities today. You can see remodeling throughout Aztec West. For example, this room and the others opening onto the plaza were added at a later date.

Natural forces of wind and rain, as well as human visitation, impact the site's stability. The National Park Service uses a variety of preservation techniques. These can include reburying rooms, replacing mortar and missing stones, and rebuilding small portions of walls. Without this constant effort to slow deterioration, the site would not survive for future generations. Over the last 100 years we may have lost some details of the ancient stonework. Even so, archeologists estimate that about 90 percent of the masonry you see is still original.



*Masonry worker Ernest Harrison
repairing an ancient doorway*

You can continue through the series of rooms and then retrace your steps back to the paved trail. Do you notice any other remodeling or preservation work?

8 The plaza was a community space where a wide variety of public activities took place. Social gatherings and traditional dances are held in the plazas of pueblos today and are often open to visitors. Excavation of the plaza revealed a long history of occupation at Aztec West throughout most of the 1100s and 1200s. These excavations uncovered thick deposits of broken pottery and all sorts of other items. The pottery pieces found in the lower layers are the oldest. Their designs resemble those found in Chaco Canyon from the



late 1000s and early 1100s. The pottery found in the upper layers is more recent. This pottery, dating from the 1200s, was similar to that found throughout the region, including at Mesa Verde. This discovery indicates that people migrated to and from Aztec throughout the site's history—bringing, sharing, and taking cultural influences.

9 By now you probably recognize this round room as a ceremonial

kiva. Today, Pueblo people still use similar spaces for sacred rituals and other activities. This kiva lies at the heart of Aztec West; this is the earliest portion of the Great House and was probably constructed in the early 1100s by migrants from Chaco Canyon. Notice the precise masonry work using carefully shaped stones

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 movement 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.

laid with little mortar and the low encircling “bench.” These details are similar to kivas found at Chaco.

The roof hatch, through which people entered the kiva, also allowed smoke to escape from the central hearth. A ventilator shaft worked like a chimney in reverse, drawing fresh air in from the outside. A stone slab or low wall placed between the ventilator shaft and the hearth kept fresh air from blowing into the fire. The low pillars resting on the encircling bench held upright beams that supported a flat roof. Flat roofs were more common during early use of the site. Later, domed roofs became more popular.

10 T-shaped doorways commonly open onto the plaza and other community spaces, including kiva roofs. Their shape may have been symbolic and important. The T-shape imagery is still used in modern pueblos. This row of rooms parallel to the trail was added after the original Chacoan construction. Notice the difference in masonry



Sherds of Chaco-style pottery from the 1100s



Mesa Verde-style mug from the 1200s

types between the inner and outer walls. Like pottery, this masonry shows how ancestral Puebloan preferences shifted with the availability of resources, material needs, or artistic tastes. Factors like these influence trends in all societies.

11 You are about to enter a series of interior rooms. The rooms are dark and the doorways are low with occasional steps up. Please be careful as you walk through these well-preserved rooms. The doors running east and west are not the original entrances. They were created after pothunters in the 1880s broke through the walls to loot the contents within. The rooms along the back wall were often used for storage as well as a place for burials.

12 In the doorway across from this room is a mat of willows sewn with yucca cord. The mat is still in the location the inhabitants left it over 800 years ago. Mats, hides, stone slabs, or feather blankets were used to close off openings between rooms and the outdoors.



Willow mat photographed in the 1920s

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.



Cotton cloth

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

13 Look up at the ceilings that are still intact after 900 years. The large beams, or vigas, are made of widely spaced spruce, Douglas fir, or ponderosa pine. The overlying smaller beams, or latillas, are made of aspen or pine. Rather than using local timber, the builders chose to bring in high-quality roof beams from higher elevations over 20 miles to the north. North is symbolic to some Pueblos as the direction from which they migrated and the place of rain and snow. The latillas supported a layer of thin juniper splints. Finally, a heavy deposit of tamped mud topped this layer, forming the floor of the story above.

The preservation of these intact roofs has made Aztec Ruins one of the most precisely dated sites in the United States.



Archeologist Aron Adams removing a core for dating

Archeologists use the science of dendrochronology, or tree-ring dating, to discover when a piece of wood was cut. This technique reveals when individual rooms were built, allows archeologists to determine the construction

sequence of the entire building, and helps us compare sites across the Four Corners region.

14 The doorways along the south wall of each room (now protected by glass) were the original entrances. People would have walked through a series of rooms beginning in the plaza to reach back rooms like these. In the later years, when more people lived in the Great House, the well-ventilated rooms close to the plaza were probably used for daily activities while dark back rooms were used for storage.

15 You can trace remnants of the upper walls of an unusual tri-wall structure, one of a handful found in the Southwest. Most archeologists think they were used ceremonially because they are so rare and have a central kiva. At least seven multi-walled kivas are found at Aztec, including the Great Kiva. Their locations and relationship to other buildings lead some to believe they were important symbols in the ritual landscape of the settlement.

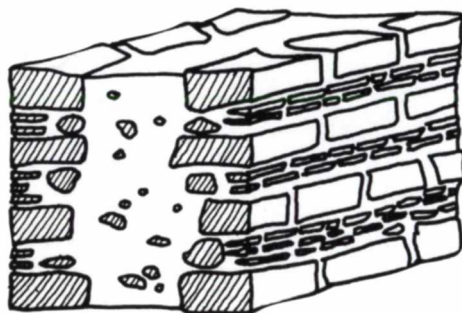
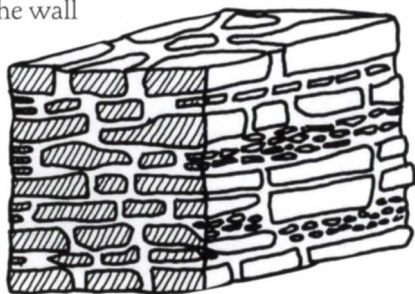
Hubbard site after excavation



Summer solstice at sunrise

16 Look along the length of the north wall of the building. If you were standing at this spot at dawn on the summer solstice, you would see the sun rise along this wall. The wall also aligns with sunset on the winter solstice. The ancestral Puebloan people incorporated solar and lunar alignments into much of their construction. Markers like this were important both agriculturally and to keep a precise ceremonial calendar that is still observed by southwestern tribes today.

17 Some of the marvels of Chacoan Great Houses are the impressive architecture, fine masonry, and high-quality materials, all of which you can see in this wall. The skill of the Chaco builders is evident in the distinctive “core and veneer” masonry. The strong center of the wall, or core, is constructed using rough stones and a lot of mud mortar. This technique allowed them to build taller walls than previously possible. Finely shaped sandstone on the outside, or veneer, gave the wall the beautiful finish that Chacoan Great Houses are known for. The people of Aztec incorporated lines of green stone within some walls, the meaning of which is unknown to archeologists. Ideas shared by some Pueblos and Navajos give us insights. The stripes have been associated with water and protection for the community.



Core and veneer

18 Eventually, though, the site no longer served the needs of the community. People started to move away from this center, perhaps because of a combination of drought and social factors. By 1300, people had left the entire region. The Pueblo people believe Aztec was just one of many stops in their migration journey to the center place. From here, they travelled west, south, and east, to Hopi, Zuni, and the other pueblos in New Mexico. In these modern communities Pueblo people keep alive many of the same traditions and customs that flourished here. The people continue to come back to honor the spirits of their ancestors who, they believe, still inhabit this special place.

Acoma Sky City



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 remember their relationship to each other, their ancestors, and the Earth Mother.



Acoma dancers at Aztec Ruins

Western
National Parks
Association



© 2013 by Western National Parks Association. All rights reserved.

ISBN 13: 978-1-58369-118-2

Written by Dr. Gregory A. Cajete of Santa Clara Pueblo; Tracy Bodnar and
Lauren Blacik of the National Park Service

Design by Laurie Miller

Editorial by Cathy Revers and National Park Service staff

Photography: Acoma Sky City courtesy of Pueblo of Acoma; all other images
courtesy of the National Park Service

Printed in the United States by Alphagraphics

22 21 20 19 18 8 9 10 11 12

Published in the United States by Western National Parks Association
12880 N Vistoso Village Dr.
Tucson, AZ 85755

Western National Parks Association (WNPA) is a nonprofit education partner of
the National Park Service. WNPA supports parks across the West,
developing products, services, and programs that enhance the visitor
experience, understanding, and appreciation of national parks. Learn more at
www.wnpa.org.

For information or wholesale inquiries, please contact publishing@wnpa.org.



ISBN-13: 978-1-58369-118-2



9 781583 691182