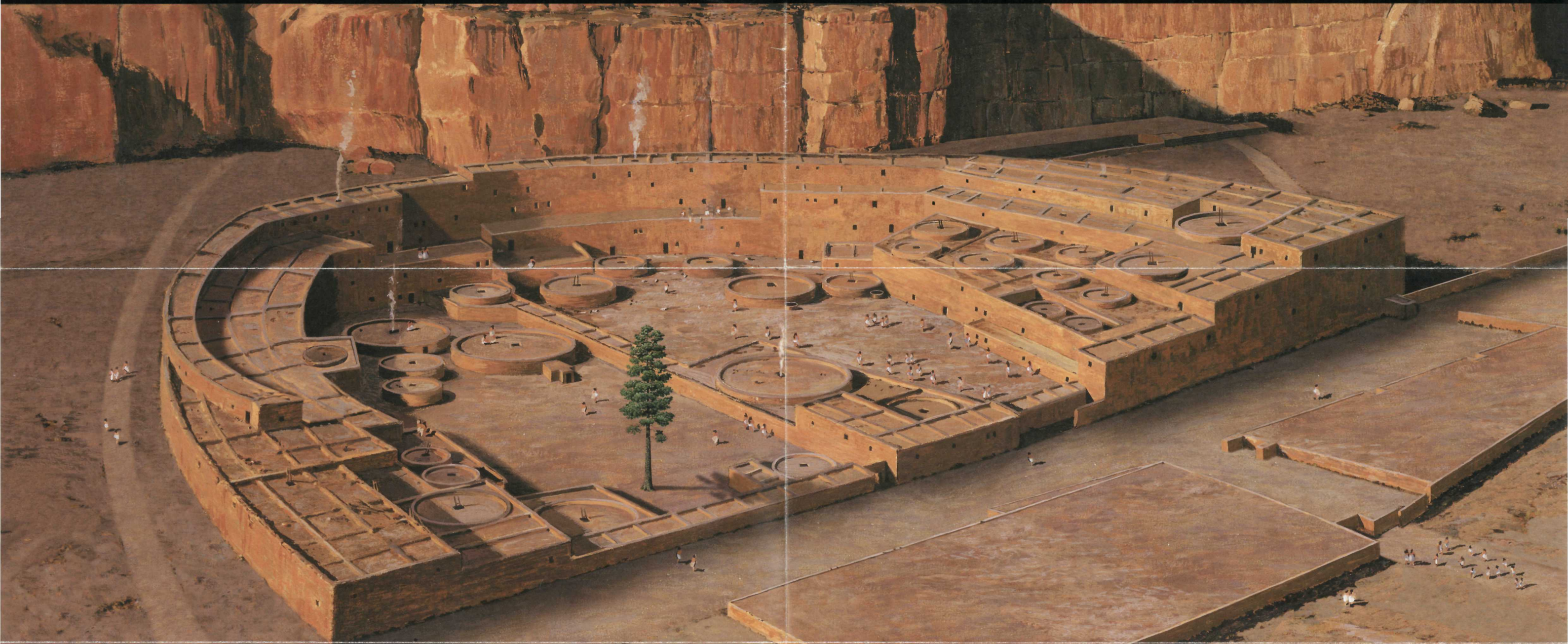




## The Center of Chacoan Culture

Created in 1907, Chaco Canyon National Monument became Chaco Culture National Historical Park in 1980 and, in 1987, a World Heritage Site.

It seems unlikely that Chaco Canyon, with its long winters, short growing seasons, and marginal rainfall, could have become a hub of regional cultures. But 1,100 to 1,200 years ago, native people made this high desert valley the center of their world. They created monumental architecture and developed far-reaching commerce and a complex social organization.

Chaco people began to build here on a grand scale in the mid-800s. Using masonry techniques unique for the time, they continued to expand their massive, multi-story stone buildings (great

houses) for over 300 years. From the start, they planned their buildings to have hundreds of rooms. Construction of some great houses spanned decades or even centuries. Each one is different, but all share features distinct to Chacoan architecture.

The great houses of Pueblo Bonito, Una Vida, and Peñasco Blanco rose in the mid- to late 800s. Hungo Pavi, Chetro Ketl, Pueblo Alto, and many others followed. Often oriented to solar, lunar, and cardinal directions, some great houses incorporated sophisticated astronomy markers. Lines of sight among the great houses enabled communication. By the early 1100s, Chaco Canyon had become a ceremonial, administrative, and economic center. Road networks linked dozens of great houses in the canyon to over 200 throughout the region. The mountains, mesas, and shrines

sacred to Chacoans continue to hold deep spiritual meaning for their descendants.

What lay at the heart of this great social experiment? According to oral traditions, people converged at Chaco because it was a sacred place, and several Navajo and Pueblo clans and ceremonies originated here. It may have been a so-called “center place,” binding regional peoples through a shared vision. Or was it the hub of a network set up to trade turquoise for macaws, copper bells, shells, and other items from distant lands? Did Chaco redistribute food and resources to growing populations when climate failed them? Continuing research may reveal answers to these questions.

Reconstruction of Pueblo Bonito, largest building in the Chacoan system, in the early 1100s.

Adapted from illustration by L. Kenneth Townsend, based on data from John Stein, Dabney Ford, and Richard Friedman, in *Mysteries of the Ancient Americas*, © 1986, The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.

By the late 1100s, reorganization of the Chacoan world led to a shift in focus to other regional centers. Chaco's influence could be seen in places like Aztec, Mesa Verde, the Chuska Mountains, and other centers to the north, south, and west. Today, many of the Southwest tribes are Chaco descendants. For these individuals, Chaco is still seen as an important stop on their clans' sacred migration paths, and a spiritual place to be honored and respected.

## Clues to the Past

### Road System

Over 400 miles of prehistoric road networks carried goods and linked Chaco to outlying communities and resource areas. One of the longest roads headed north toward the prehistoric communities of Salmon and Aztec.

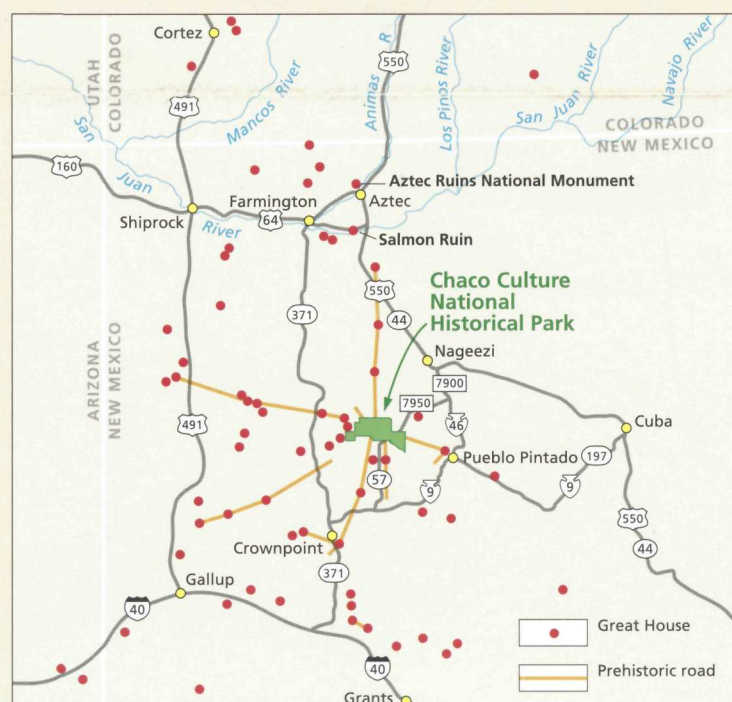
These were not mere foot trails but carefully engineered roads, labor-intensive to build and maintain. The road system is most elaborate near the great houses, where two- and four-lane segments may have related to ritual and ceremony.

While the roads served a practical purpose, they also may have held a greater meaning that reflected the Chacoan worldview.

### Trade

Between the early 900s and mid-1100s Chaco was the center of far-reaching trade networks extending in all directions. Sea shells, macaws, copper bells, and cacao (chocolate) are evidence that Chacoans traded with others as far away as central Mexico.

Chacoans valued turquoise highly, and left great quantities of or-



Chaco Culture and related great houses.

naments, offerings, and worksite debris in the canyon. They imported raw turquoise from distant mines, crafting it into exquisite beads, necklaces, and pendants. A small frog (right) found in Pueblo Bonito, carved from jet, has a collar and eyes of inlaid turquoise.

The distinctive black-on-white Cibola pottery (below) may have originated in communities to the south and west. Most of the pottery found at Chaco was probably made elsewhere.



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### Masonry

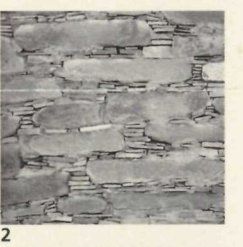
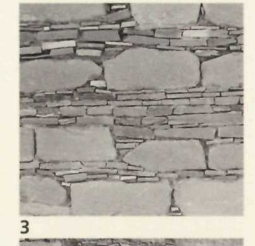
Chacoans used stone tools to construct vast, communal buildings that still compel our admiration. Their techniques evolved over centuries.

The earliest walls were one stone thick and bonded with generous courses of mud mortar. At Pueblo Bonito the oldest walls are of this masonry type (1). To make higher, longer walls, Chacoan builders widened the rubble cores and added structural stone veneers and internal wooden supports.

Another early masonry type used large tabular sandstone blocks chinked with smaller stones set in mortar (2).

Chacoans developed ever more intricate masonry styles through the mid to late 1000s (3 and 4). Yet they covered many walls in plaster, sometimes with painted or engraved decorations.

By the early 1100s, a different style known as McElmo became prominent (5). Seen in Kin Klesto and elsewhere, it has thinner rubble cores and thicker veneers of shaped sandstone.





# A Guide to Chaco Culture



Pueblo del Arroyo.

© BOB YOUNG



Flooring of Pueblo del Arroyo.

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New Alto, part of the Pueblo Alto complex.

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Doorways of Pueblo Bonito.

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Chetro Ketl.

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Casa Rinconada.

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## Chaco's Ancient Architecture

At the visitor center, see the exhibits about Chaco and its people. Staff will help you make the most of your time. Take a ranger-led walk, and ask about other programs.

The great house closest to the visitor center, Una Vida, is a short walk from the parking area. This unexcavated early great house has probably the most extensive view of the cultural landscape from the canyon floor. A short hike up the talus slope from Una Vida is a striking petroglyph panel.

Down canyon from Una Vida, at the mouth of Mockingbird Canyon, is Hungo Pavi great house. It is strategically located near natural drainages, and several seeps and springs. Of all the great houses, Hungo Pavi is the most easily accessed from the parking area. The short trail around the building and through the plaza passes an ancient stairway carved into the cliff.

Pueblo Bonito, the core of the Chaco complex and the largest great house, lies farther down the canyon. Built in stages between the mid-800s and early 1100s, Pueblo Bonito reached at least four stories with over 600 rooms and 40 kivas. East of Pueblo Bonito, a petroglyph trail leads to Chetro Ketl.

Chetro Ketl, another of the largest great houses, includes an immense elevated earthen plaza. The trail offers a unique view into the lower sections of the building and the construction sequences of the great kiva.

Chacoans built Pueblo del Arroyo, Spanish for "village by the wash," over a relatively short time. The round tri-wall structure seen at the west side of the building is rare in the Chaco region. The building's position took advantage of an unobstructed view through South Gap and toward Hosta Butte.

The placement and width of the east wall at Kin Klesto may have provided observation points for predicting and confirming the winter solstice sunrise. Other great houses may have been similarly oriented to other celestial cycles.

Casa Rinconada, on the canyon's south side, is the largest excavated great kiva in the park. The trail to this great house passes a dozen so-called "small house sites" contemporary with Casa Rinconada but different in construction and function.

Hiking trails (see *map*) lead to many other sites. The Pueblo Alto Complex, atop the mesa, is important as the junction of dozens of prehistoric roads. Tsin Kletsin and Peñasco Blanco can be reached by hiking from the central canyon. Wijiji, built in one stage in the early 1100s, is noted for its symmetrical layout and uniformly sized rooms. Find hiking permits, required for these trails, at the trailheads or visitor center.

## About Your Visit

Chaco Culture National Historical Park is in northwestern New Mexico. *The recommended access route is from the north, via US Hwy 550/44 and County Roads 7900 and 7950.* Turn off US 550 at CR 7900, 3 miles east of Nageezi and 50 miles west of Cuba (at mile 112.5). Follow the signs south on CR 7900 for 5 miles (paved), then turn right on CR 7950 (16 miles, mostly unpaved) to the park boundary.

Two roads access Chaco from the south, both from Navajo 9, running from Crownpoint, Pueblo Pintado, and Cuba. Signs direct you to the park via Pueblo Pintado and via Seven Lakes. At Pueblo Pintado, go north on Navajo 46 (for 1 mile), left on CR 7900 (16 miles), and left on CR 7950 (16 miles) to the park entrance (33 miles, rough dirt). At Seven Lakes (3 miles north and 12 miles east of Crownpoint), go north on NM Rt. 57 to the park entrance (20 miles, rough dirt). *All routes have sections of dirt roads that may be impassable in inclement weather. Call 505-786-7014, ext. 221, for road conditions.*

No lodging, gasoline, repair services, or food is available in the park. The National Park Service's Gallo Campground, one mile from the visitor center, has tables, fire rings, and central toilets. Water and firewood are available at the visitor center. No RVs or trailers over 35 feet long are permitted in the campground. Camping is limited to 14 days.

**For Your Safety and the Park's Protection**  
The park staff is here to help you understand and enjoy the park and to protect all cultural and natural resources. The 1906 Federal Antiquities Act and 1979 Archeological Resources Protection Act prohibit appropriation, injury, destruction, or removal of any object of antiquity, or the excavation, injury, or destruction of any archeological site, on federal land.

*Remember that the past belongs to everyone.* These fragile, irreplaceable sites are part of the sacred homeland of the Hopi, the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, and the Navajo, among others. Help preserve the World Heri-

tage Site; follow park regulations. • Do not remove natural or cultural features. • Do not deface, add to, or alter petroglyphs, pictographs, or rocks. • Do not walk, climb, sit, or lean on walls. • Stay on designated trails. • All trails close from sunset to 7 am. • For firearms regulations check the park website.

**Accessibility**  
We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all; call or check our website.

**More Information**  
Chaco Culture National Historical Park  
PO Box 220, Nageezi, NM 87037-0220  
505-786-7014  
[www.nps.gov/chcu](http://www.nps.gov/chcu)

Chaco Culture National Historical Park is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

**National Park Foundation.**  
Join the park community.  
[www.nationalparks.org](http://www.nationalparks.org)

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**Hiking Chaco's Trails**  
All backcountry hiking trails require a free permit, available at the visitor center or trailheads. • Stay on designated trails for your safety and to preserve the park's resources.

• Camping and fires are not permitted in the backcountry. • All trails and Chacoan cultural sites close from sunset to 7 am. • Pets are permitted only on backcountry

trails. They must be leashed. • The park's elevation is 6,200 feet. Winters are cold and summers hot, with little shade. • Brief, violent thunderstorms occur in summer. • Trails are steep, uneven, and icy in winter. • Wear hiking boots and appropriate clothing and be sure to drink plenty of water. • Prepare for extremes. • Watch out for rattlesnakes.

