



GILA CLIFF DWELLINGS TRAIL GUIDE



Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument
New Mexico

FOR YOUR SAFETY

To help ensure your safety and protect the monument, please remember the following during your visit:

- Stay on the trail at all times. In addition to endangering yourself, leaving the trail to explore or take photographs disturbs the plants and terrain.
- You may take water with you on the trail, but leave other food and drink items in the car, for they generate litter and spills that harm the dwellings.
- No smoking. Discarded cigarette butts can cause fires and create unsightly litter.
- Pets are not allowed on the trail. If you would like to use our kennels, they are located behind the contact station at the parking lot. *Disability guide dogs are allowed on the trail.*
- Do not disturb or remove plants, wildlife, or other natural features in your national monument. Leave objects as they are so others may enjoy them.

THANK YOU!

ABOUT THE TRAIL

The one-mile loop trail to the cliff dwellings takes about one hour. The first half of the trail is fairly level and leads you to a scenic view of the dwellings, nestled high in the canyon wall. Beyond this point, steep stairs with no rails climb 180 feet. Some visitors may find this second half of the trail strenuous, and it has proven hazardous for persons with a heart condition, emphysema, or similar health problems. The unpaved trail is rugged, and adverse weather conditions such as rain, snow, or ice make the trail slippery and very muddy. We suggest you wear shoes that provide good traction, protection, and support.

TRAIL GUIDE

Over seven hundred years ago, a small band of forty to sixty people made the cliff dwellings above this narrow canyon their home. At that time, on a peaceful afternoon, you might have heard the cries of young children bathing in the river, the plaintive call of one neighbor to another, or the teasing conversation of men discussing a recent hunt. A boy carrying a string of fish, and a girl with a basket of herbs, might be seen running up the trail. Women coming home from the nearby fields of corn, squash, and beans might have quickened their steps as the tantalizing odor of roasting meat or corn over a wood fire greeted them.

In many ways, these people were much like ourselves. They laughed, wept, loved, sang, feared and fought. In other ways their lives were so different as to be unimaginable. Still, it is only through the imagination, with a little help from archeological discoveries, that we can ever enter the foreign country that is our past. As you visit Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, let your imagination "remember" what it was like to skin a rabbit, grind corn, and dig for clay. Go back to a time when stars crowded the evening sky, and the only other light was a flickering fire.

Once you have crossed the footbridge, follow the trail to the left. The following paragraphs correspond to numbered markers on the trail.

1

The Native Americans who lived here by the Gila (HEE-la) River are from a culture known as the Mogollon (Muggy-OWN). We know that these people were about three inches shorter than men and women are today. Adults did not live much past the age of forty-five, and children often died very young. Because their pottery is different from that of earlier Mogollon in this area, archeologists believe these cliff dwellers may have come from the Tularosa River, fifty miles to the northwest. We do not know why they left that region for this one. Were they refugees from war or disease? Had they used up certain natural resources? Were they prompted to move for religious or social reasons? Did they have a charismatic leader or decide to move together as a group? As usual, we have more questions than answers.

2

Millions of years ago, volcanic activity formed the cliffs towering above you. Such rugged scenery is typical of the mountainous Gila Wilderness. If you look directly up the cliff on the opposite side of the creek, you will see a cave midway between the dark-colored ledge and the top of the ridge. This is one of several natural caves which protect against wind, rain, lightning, cold and heat. The one you see now was difficult to reach, and apparently the Mogollon did not use it. As you continue up the trail, the other caves will be high above you on the right, partially hidden behind the ledge.

3

The people who settled here wanted running water close to their home. This creek, which still flows year-round, is only a short distance from the caves. The streambed and the nearby Gila River provided clay, which the Mogollon

used for mortar in building their cliff dwellings. The canyon's lush vegetation attracted wildlife that included whitetail and mule deer, jackrabbit, cottontail, rock squirrel, muskrat, woodrat, and fox. Mogollon hunters were always alert to the signs of game. They watched the ground for tracks and noted the sound of breaking leaves or a sudden rippling of grass. As you walk this trail today, listen to the varied songs of birds and insects. If you are observant, you will see and hear evidence of wild animals that still live here.

4

With a growing season of about 150 days, these ancient farmers tended a variety of crops that consisted of several kinds of corn, three different beans, and four types of squash. As you can imagine, farming in this small canyon was impossible. The cliff dwellers probably planted their fields near the Gila River in flat, fertile areas. Although they may have used a form of irrigation, no trace of that system remains today.

5

If you look in the direction from which you came, you can see the cliff dwellings. Most Mogollon communities built on open, flat terraces near their fields. We do not know why this band chose to live in caves. Perhaps they got the idea from the Anasazi in the north, who were experienced cliff dwellers and influenced the Mogollon in many ways during this period. Perhaps, for some reason, these settlers felt the need for greater security and protection.

Remember as you climb upward that the men, women, and children who lived here made the same climb every day to bring home their water and food. A woman carrying a heavy pot, a man in the last years of life, a child hurrying to keep up with an older sister—they might have stopped, as well, to catch their breath!

From this point, steep stairs lead up the cliff to the dwellings. Please watch your step. Remember to stay on the trail at all times, even when you are taking photographs. If you have a heart condition, emphysema, or similar health problems, consider viewing the caves from here to avoid the strenuous climb.

6

The cliff dwellers must have started building soon after they arrived in the late A.D. 1270s. In the first ten years or so, they extended their home through most of the caves and constructed about forty rooms. This cave contains the foundations of three small storage rooms and a hearth. The two circular depressions were probably used to support round-bottomed storage jars.

7

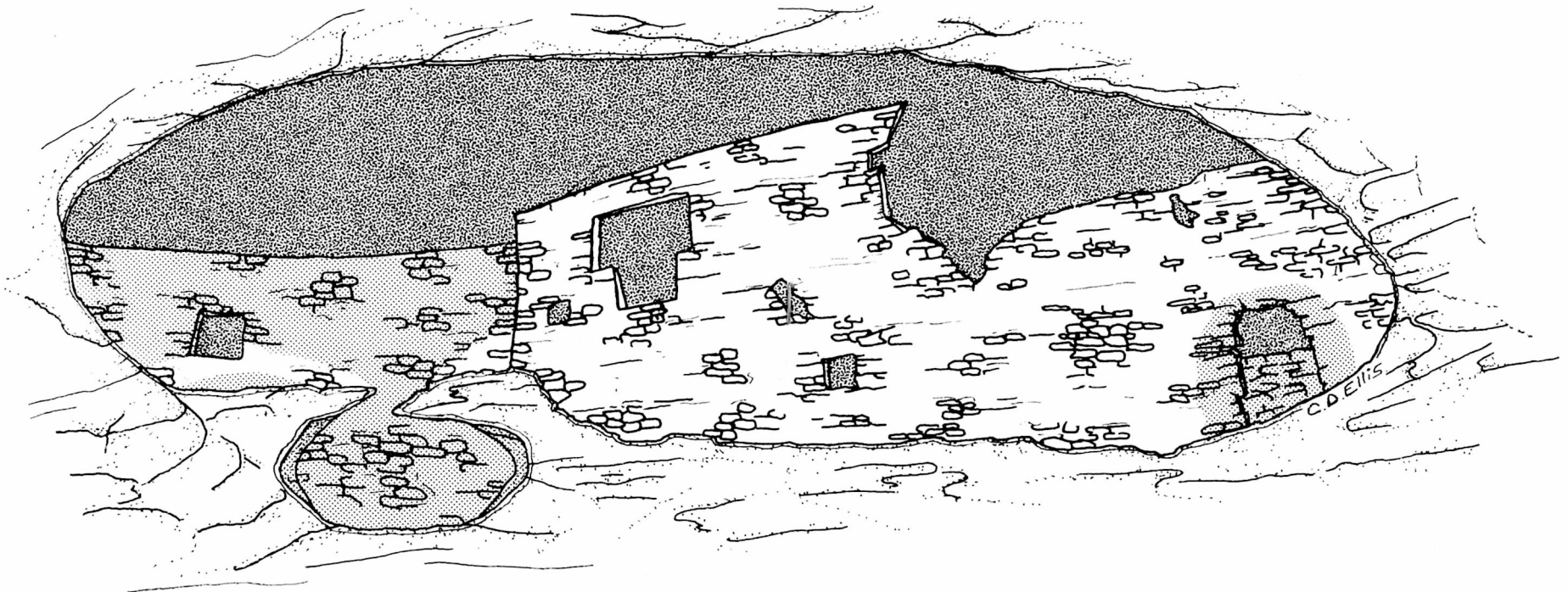
Using stones from the floor, the cliff dwellers built eight rooms on two levels in this cave. The second floor balcony

was supported by the original beams you see extending from the wall. The cliff dwellers entered the upper rooms through the T-shaped doorway. For reasons unknown to us, such doorways were common throughout the Southwest. Although most of the cliff dwellings are original, some areas have been restored. By comparing the walls before you with the drawing below, you can determine which parts have been reconditioned by the National Park Service.

As you continue, do not enter any of the following rooms, and remain behind all barriers. The cliff dwellings are extremely fragile and can be damaged easily. Please help preserve them by not touching, leaning against, sitting on, or climbing over the walls. Thank you!

8

Above the arched entrance to this cave are roof beams called vigas (VEE-gahs). Their blackened surface



Shaded areas have been restored or reconstructed by the National Park Service.

suggests how the cliff dwellers used fire to soften the wood before cutting it with their stone axes. When not tending their fields, hunting, or gathering, these Mogollon centered their daily life in and around the caves. In good weather, they performed many tasks on the ledge where you have been walking. We know that these people made cotton cloth, plaited sandals from yucca leaves, wove mats and baskets, painted designs on clay pots and jars, and fashioned jewelry out of shells and feathers. Making and repairing tools for farming and hunting was another constant job. Then, of course, there was corn to grind and other foods to prepare. This was a busy place in the thirteenth century, with much work to be done. All the while, the people probably talked and gossiped and kept track of young children playing nearby.

9

Most of the black soot covering the ceiling of this cave was left by the fires of hunters who camped here before the time of the Mogollon. The cliff dwellers constructed rooms in the mouth of this cave and at the far side, but not in the back. Instead, they partly covered the area with a hard clay floor. We wonder today how they used such a large, open space. Perhaps it was a special work site, a safe place for babies and toddlers, or an arena for singing, dancing, and story-telling.

10

The area below you was once divided into two large rooms by a wall that ran across the front of the second terrace. The rooms probably served as living spaces. Notice how the cliff dwellers plastered their walls with clay and gave each room a hearth.

11

This room once had a sturdy roof made of vigas covered with split juniper slats and a thick layer of mud. Judging from its large size, this may have been a communal

or ceremonial area. We are certain rituals and myths played an important role in the cliff dwellers' world. Archeologists have found in these caves many reed cigarettes filled with unknown plant material, and believe they were part of the Mogollon's religious and spiritual life. There is no evidence, however, that the people here used any of these rooms as kivas (KEE-vahs), traditional ceremonial chambers.

Please be very cautious as you cross the narrow ledge past stop 12. Remember to help preserve the dwellings by not touching, leaning against, sitting on, or climbing over the walls.

12

Macaw feathers from northern Mexico and a bison rib scraper from the eastern plains are some of the items found here which indicate these people traded with other tribes. The means by which they contacted other groups is not known. Possibly traders traveled here and were welcomed for their goods and for the news they brought of other communities. Perhaps there were explorers from this band who went out to see more of the world beyond. Or, objects might have been traded in a succession from one neighbor to the next. Most materials used by the cliff dwellers, however, were not acquired by trade, but were made by their skilled hands. As you walk along the narrow ledge ahead of you, look into the first room on your left. This was likely a work area which, for some reason, the builders chose to leave without a roof. They also never finished the rough floor.

Please remember to be cautious on the narrow ledge.

13

In this two-story structure, you can still see upper floor beams extending from the right wall. Because the rooms are small, you might think they were used for storage. But the

smoke hole found above the upper doorway, and the soot blackening the inside walls suggest it was used as a living area. Such rooms demonstrate what it might have felt like to be a cliff dweller; poised like an eagle, high in a nest.

14

The ancient corncobs in this bin were left by the Mogollon who lived here seven hundred years ago. They ground their corn into meal with stones like those on the floor. Today the larger, flat stone is called a metate (meh-TAH-tay) and the smaller stone is called a mano (MAH-no). In addition to corn, the cliff dwellers processed many wild plants, seeds and nuts. They sought rabbit and turkey, but primarily they hunted mule deer. They cooked their food in clay pots, placed on hot coals. They baked and broiled some food, and might have used heated flat stones as griddles. Meals may not always have been plentiful, and to modern tastes, the texture and seasoning would have been strange. Still, it is not hard to picture late summer feasts of grilled trout, venison, turkey, corn, squash, wild greens, chokecherries, and prickly pear.

15

This room, which is larger than most of the others nearby, may have been another communal or ceremonial area. The rooms built directly against the back of the cave were probably used for storage or as living space. You can see that sometimes the cliff dwellers constructed roofs over these rooms, and sometimes they relied on the cave's stone ceiling. We can only speculate about their living arrangements. Who got which room and why? Were some rooms considered better and more prestigious? Did people quarrel and scheme for a particular place? Or did they go naturally to the area where they fit best—young couples, parents with children, bachelors, leaders, healers? All we know is that some forty to sixty people lived here for about twenty years before they left for unknown reasons. During their stay, they struggled to build a sturdy, well-constructed home, which still stands seven hundred years later.

16

Without roof, wall plaster or hearth, the large isolated room beyond this point was probably another work area. We are not sure how the cliff dwellers reached this room, since no remains of their ladders or wooden balconies survived. We can assume, however, that these people were adept at climbing and comfortable with heights.

You may exit the caves by descending the ladder near stop 13, or by returning to the wooden stairway through which you entered. Take the trail to the left to return to the parking lot. Please watch your step. The trail is steep and rugged.

17

As you look at the stunning view of the cave above, remember that this was an everyday sight for the cliff dwellers. They lived here nestled in their comfortable home, above a rich and beautiful river, for almost two generations. As you leave, you might wonder what compelled the cliff dwellers to leave. Did their crops fail? Did something or someone frighten them away? Did they think they could find a better life elsewhere? Where did they go? Why did they go? In this matter, the past is stubbornly silent.

Do not attempt to enter the cave just ahead. The cave does not contain any dwellings, and it is hazardous and closed to the public.

18

The cliff dwellers probably left by following the river canyon below. Surely, some of them stood where you stand now. They could not have imagined that some day you would be standing here as well, pondering their fate. It is this continuum—the past, present and future linked by our common humanity—that makes this site as alive and vital for people today as it was for the Mogollon, so long ago.

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