

Hovenweep

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Monument
Colorado/Utah



The Towers of Hovenweep

The canyon and mesa country north of the San Juan River holds many archeological sites where ancestors of today's Pueblo Indian tribes lived. Round, square, and D-shaped towers grouped at canyon heads most visibly mark once-thriving communities. No one has lived in them for over 700 years, but they are still inspiring. As today's visitors explore Hovenweep, they often wonder why these towers were built and what sort of communities their builders created.

Many dwellings stood right on the canyon rim, and some structures were built atop isolated or irregular boulders—not practical sites for safety and access. Most are associated with springs and seeps near canyon heads. Such locations suggest that the ancestral Pueblo people were protecting something, if not themselves then perhaps the water—extremely valuable to desert-dwelling agriculturalists. By the 1200s the population had grown dramatically, and pollen studies show that much of the tree cover had been removed. Perhaps drought and depleted resources figured prominently in the ancestral Pueblo peoples' sudden departure in the late 1200s. While many questions remain unanswered, continuing archeological studies improve our understanding of ancestral Pueblo culture.



Hovenweep Castle (top of page), Horseshoe Tower (above), and a petroglyph (center right) help to tell the story of these ancient peoples.

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W.D. Huntington first reported these structures after he led an 1854 Mormon expedition into southeastern Utah. Pioneering photographer William Henry Jackson in 1874 first used the name "Hovenweep," which is Ute/Paiute for "deserted valley." When J.W. Fewkes surveyed the area for the Smithsonian Institution in 1917–18 he recommended the structures be protected. Finally, in 1923 President Warren G. Harding proclaimed Hovenweep a national monument.

Today tall towers, outlines of multi-room pueblos, tumbled piles of shaped stone, small cliff dwellings, pottery sherds, and rock art lie scattered across the canyon landscape leaving little doubt that a sizeable population once lived in this ruggedly beautiful,

high desert setting. Despite seven centuries of weathering, many large structures and tall tower walls still stand as tributes to their builders. The intricate stonework crafted by these ancestral Pueblo masons is also revealed in the finely hewn stones, sharp corners, and smooth curves of Hovenweep's architecture. Rubble mounds show that even more structures were once significant parts of these villages.

Visitors can walk along quiet, primitive trails and imagine what these communities must have been like long ago when hundreds if not thousands of people lived on this mesa. Hovenweep is truly a place to ponder the past.

Exploring Hovenweep

The People of Hovenweep

Archeological studies across the Four Corners region have produced intriguing information about past cultures inhabiting this part of the Southwest. Over 13,000 years ago nomadic Paleo-Indian hunters roamed the plateaus and canyons hunting wild animals. Drier climate conditions displaced these people—as larger animals moved elsewhere—and ushered in Archaic hunter-gatherers from the west about 11,000 years ago.

These people—eventually to be known as the ancestral Pueblo people—were initially mobile, taking temporary shelter beneath canyon overhangs and in shallow alcoves as they traveled in search of food. As they began to cultivate corn, life became more structured, and beginning around the year 200, they built pithouses closer to their crops in valleys and on mesa tops.

Climate changes sometimes dictated that the people relocate to higher or lower elevations to ensure optimal growing conditions. The Hovenweep area was still relatively uninhabited for many centuries then. About the year 700, as the surrounding populations grew, people began to filter onto Cajon Mesa, which contains Hovenweep.

Larger numbers of people did not come to the area until after 1100. The final wave of building that created the Hovenweep towers began around 1230 as people began moving away from mesa-top homes. Instead of small, scattered clusters of dwellings, larger villages were built around canyon heads that contained water sources.

Despite marginal growing conditions, ancestral Pueblo people raised corn, beans, squash, and other crops in small fields and terraces, often using check dams for irrigation. They used solar calendars and astronomy to calculate growing seasons. They developed many other natural resources to improve their lives. Examples of well-made pottery, jewelry, and clothing clearly suggest that these villages were part of a well-developed society. Non-native materials like macaw feathers point to active trading with cultures to the south in Mexico.

By the late 1200s, prolonged drought, overuse of natural resources, and, possibly, internal strife led to the eventual abandonment of the region. The people settled in what are now the pueblos of the Rio Grande valley in New Mexico and the Hopi mesas of Arizona.



Aerial view of the Square Tower community at Little Ruin Canyon



The Twin Towers; also visible in the lower left corner of the picture above

About Your Visit

Access

Hovenweep is open all year. Paved roads lead to the Square Tower Group and visitor center from Cortez, Colo. (42 miles), Pleasant View, Colo. (24 miles) and Blanding, Utah (45 miles). Outlying sites are on dirt roads that are impassable when wet and only suitable for high-clearance vehicles when dry. Gasoline is not available.

Activities

Access to sites is by foot trail only—expect to walk some. Interpretive activities led by rangers are available seasonally. Group activities may be arranged in advance. In the visitor center a video program is shown on request.

Hiking Trails

An easy, two-mile self-guiding loop trail encompasses the Square Tower Group next to

the visitor center. Outlier trails are between .25 and 1.5 miles long, round trip. An 8-mile round-trip hike connects the Square Tower and Holly groups. **Hiking is limited to existing trails only.**

Camping

A 30-site campground near the visitor center is open year-round. A few sites accommodate vehicles up to 35 feet long. There are no hook-

ups or dump station. Availability is first-come, first-served and a fee is required.

Preservation

All cultural resources, structures, and artifacts are fully protected by federal law. **Entering structures or canyon interiors is not permitted.**

Safety

Hovenweep trails go across rough terrain

that features sudden drop-offs. Stay on trails and watch your step at all times. Do not leave children unsupervised. In hot weather drink plenty of water, wear a hat, and use sunscreen.

More Information

Hovenweep National Monument
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Cortez, CO 81321
970-562-4282
www.nps.gov/hove

Hovenweep is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

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