

Mesa Verde

Mesa Verde
National Park
Colorado

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The Mesa Top

The Anasazi grew crops and hunted game on the mesa tops. The soil was fertile and, except in drought, about as well watered as now. The vegetation is also about the same today as it was then, but with less pinyon and

juniper, which the Indians cut for firewood and to clear land for farming. They reached their fields over hand-and-toe-hold trails pecked into the cliffs.

Farming

The Indians grew their staple crops of corn, beans, and squash in fields scattered across the mesa tops. They worked the soil with a digging stick and often built check dams along draws to conserve moisture.

The World of the Anasazi

About 1400 years ago, long before any European exploration of the New World, a group of Indians living in the Four Corners region chose Mesa Verde for their home. For over 700 years their descendants lived and flourished here, eventually building elaborate stone cities in the sheltered recesses of the canyon walls. Then in the late 1200s, within the span of one or two generations, they abandoned their homes and moved away.

Mesa Verde National Park, which occupies part of a large plateau rising high above the Montezuma and Mancos Valleys, preserves a spectacular remnant of their thousand-year-old culture. We call these people the Anasazi, from a Navajo word meaning "the ancient ones." Ever since local cowboys discovered the cliff dwellings a century ago, archeologists have been trying to understand the life of these people. But despite decades of excavation, analysis, classification, and comparison our knowledge is still sketchy. We will never know the whole story of their existence, for they left no written records and much that was important in their lives has perished. Yet for all their silence, these ruins speak with a certain eloquence. They tell of a people adept at building, artistic in their

crafts, and skillful at wresting a living from a difficult land. They are evidence of a society that over the centuries accumulated skills and traditions and passed them on from one generation to another. By classic times (A.D. 1100 to 1300), the Anasazi of Mesa Verde were the heirs of a vigorous civilization, with accomplishments in community living and the arts that rank among the finest expressions of human culture in ancient America.

Taking advantage of nature, the Anasazi built their dwellings under the overhanging cliffs. Their basic construction material was sandstone, which they shaped into rectangular blocks about the size of a loaf of bread. The mortar between the blocks was a mix of mud and water. Rooms averaged about 6 feet by 8, space enough for two or three persons. Isolated rooms in the rear and on the upper levels were generally used for storing crops.

Much of the daily routine took place in the open courtyards in front of the rooms. The women fashioned pottery there, while the men made various tools—knives, axes, awls, scrapers—out of stone and bone. The fires built in summer were

mainly for cooking. In winter, when the cave rooms were damp and uncomfortable, fires probably burned throughout the village. Smoke-blackened walls and ceilings are reminders of the biting cold these people lived with for half of every year.

Clothing closely followed the seasons. In summer, the adults wore simple loincloths and sandals. In winter, they dressed in hides and skins and wrapped themselves against the cold in blankets made of turkey feathers and robes of rabbit fur.

Getting food was a ceaseless struggle, even in the best of years. Farming was the main business of these people, but they supplemented their crops of corn, beans, and squash by gathering wild plants and hunting deer, rabbits, squirrels, and other game. Their only domestic animals were dogs and turkeys.

Fortunately for us, the Anasazi tossed their trash close by. Scraps of food, broken pottery and tools, anything unwanted went down the slope in front of their houses. Much of what we know about daily life here comes from these garbage heaps.

A person standing across the canyon from Spruce Tree House in the middle 1200s might have seen something like the view above. This village was one of the largest in Mesa Verde. It had 114 rooms and 8 kivas. About 100 to 125 persons lived here. Hundreds of years before this village was built, their ancestors probably lived in pithouses in this same shelter. These villagers are experienced builders, as we can see by a glance at the construction. The walls are tall and straight, laid up with stones carefully shaped. The season in this scene is autumn, the busiest time of the year for the villagers. The harvest is underway. Some men are still clearing the fields, while others spread crops on a roof top to dry. These are the stores that will see them through the long winter and even the next year or two if there is drought. Women are making pottery and grinding corn. Children scamper about and old men sit in the sun and tell stories. The scene is conjectural but entirely plausible. We probably will never know a great deal more about this people.

Painting by Roy Anderson

Tools

The Anasazi were a stone-age people, without metal of any kind. They skillfully shaped stone, bone, and wood into a variety of tools for grinding, cutting, pounding, chopping, perforating, scraping, polishing, and weaving. They used the digging stick for farming, the stone axe for clearing land, the bow and arrow for hunting,

and sharp-edged stones for cutting. They ground corn with the metate and mano and made wooden spindle whorls for weaving. From bone they fashioned awls for sewing and scrapers for working hides. They usually made their stone tools from stream cobbles rather than the soft sandstone of the cliffs.



Basketry



The finest Anasazi baskets were produced at an early stage of their culture, before they learned how to make pottery. Using the spiral coil technique, they wove handsomely decorated baskets of many sizes and shapes and used them for carrying water, storing grain, and even cooking. They waterproofed their baskets by lining them

with pitch and cooked in them by dropping heated stones into the water. The most common weaving material was split willow, but some times rabbit-brush or skunkbrush was used. After the introduction of pottery about A.D. 550, basketry declined. The few baskets found here from the classic period are of inferior workmanship.



Pottery



The Anasazi Family

The structure of Anasazi life is difficult to know. Archeology has yielded some information, but without written documents, there is no way to be sure about their social, political, or religious ideas. We must rely for insight on comparisons with the modern Pueblo people of New Mexico and Arizona. In classic times at Mesa Verde,

several generations probably lived together as a household. Each family occupied several rooms and built additional ones as it grew. Several related families constituted a clan, which may well have been matrilineal (descent through the female line) in organization. If the analogy with current Hopi practice is correct, each clan had its own kiva and

rights to its own agricultural plots.

The figures above are an idealized view of the Anasazi as individuals. The family is dressed for winter in hides, feather-cloth robes, and warm foot-wear. The skills of the husband as hunter and the wife as potter are evident. The turkey is an important part of their

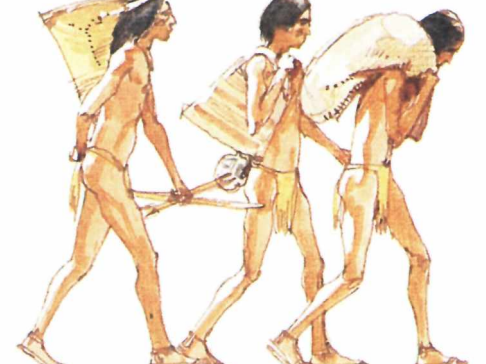
economy. It provided food and its feathers were used for weaving and its bones for tools.

The farmer at right holds a stone-tipped digging stick and wears sandals made of yucca, a useful native plant.

Trade

Mesa Verde's economy was more complex than might appear at first glance. Even within a small agricultural community, there undoubtedly were persons more skilled than others at weaving or leather-working or making pottery, arrow points, jewelry, baskets, sandals, or other specialized articles. Their efficiency gave them a sur-

plus, which they shared or bartered with neighbors. This exchange went on between communities too. Seashells from the coast, turquoise, pottery, and cotton from the south were some of the items that found their way to Mesa Verde, passed along from village to village or carried by traders on foot over a far-flung network of trails.

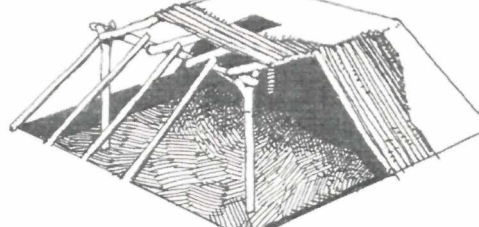


The Living Past

The first Anasazi settled in Mesa Verde (Spanish for "green table") about A.D. 550. They are known as Basketmakers because of their impressive skill at that craft. Formerly a nomadic people, they were now beginning to lead a more settled way of life. Farming replaced hunting-and-gathering as their main source of livelihood. They lived in pithouses clustered into small villages, which they usually built on the mesa tops but occasionally in the cliff recesses. They soon learned how to make pottery, and they acquired the bow and arrow, a more efficient weapon for hunting than the atlatl, or spear thrower.

These were fairly prosperous times for the Basketmakers, and their population multiplied. About 750 they began building houses above ground, with upright walls made of poles and mud. They built these houses one against another in long, curving rows, often with a pithouse or two in front. The pithouses were probably the forerunners of the kivas of later times. From this time on, these people are known as Pueblos, a Spanish word for village dwellers.

Pithouses



The pithouse represents the beginnings of a settled way of life, based on agriculture. Its basic features were a living room, squarish in shape and sunk a few feet into the ground, four main timbers at the corners to support the roof, a fireplace with

an air deflector, an antechamber, which might contain storage bins or pits, and a sipapu. Pithouses evolved into the kivas of later times. In Mesa Verde, the Anasazi lived in this type of dwelling from about A.D. 550 to 750.

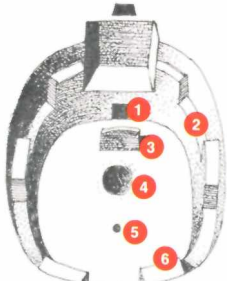
By 1000 the Anasazi had advanced from pole-and-adobe construction to skillful stone masonry. Their walls of thick, double-coursed stone often rose two or three stories high and were joined together into units of 50 rooms or more. Pottery also changed, as black drawings on a white background replaced crude designs on dull gray. Farming provided more of the diet than before, and much mesa-top land was cleared for that purpose.

The years from 1100 to 1300 were Mesa Verde's classic period. The population may have reached several thousand. It was mostly concentrated in compact villages of many rooms, often with the kivas built inside the enclosing walls rather than out in the open. Round towers began to appear, and there was a rising level of craftsmanship in masonry work, pottery, weaving, jewelry, and even tool-making. The stone walls of the large pueblos are regarded as the finest ever built in Mesa Verde; they are made of carefully shaped stones laid up in straight courses. Baskets show evidence of decline in workmanship, but this may be due to the

widespread use of pottery and consequent less attention to the craft. About 1200 there was another major population shift. The Anasazi began to move back into the cliff alcoves that had sheltered their ancestors long centuries before. We don't know why they made this move. Perhaps it was for defense; perhaps the caves offered better protection from the elements; perhaps there were religious or psychological reasons. Whatever the reason or combination of reasons, it gave rise to the cliff dwellings for which Mesa Verde is famous.

Most of the cliff dwellings were built in the middle decades of the 1200s. They range in size from one-room houses to villages of over 200 rooms (Cliff Palace). Architecturally, there is no standard ground plan. The builders fitted their structures to the available space. Most walls were single courses of stone, perhaps because the cave roofs limited heights and also protected them from erosion by the weather. The masonry work varied in quality: rough construction can be found alongside walls with well-shaped stones.

The Kiva



- 1 ventilator
- 2 bench
- 3 air deflector
- 4 fire-pit
- 5 sipapu
- 6 pilaster

Kiva is a Hopi word for "ceremonial room." Anasazi kivas were underground chambers which may be compared to churches of later times. Based upon modern Pueblo practice, the Anasazi may have used them to conduct healing rites or to pray for rain, luck in hunting, or good crops. Kivas also served as gathering places, and weaving was sometimes done there. A roof of beams and mud covered each kiva; access was by ladder through a hole in the center. The small hole in the floor is a sipapu—the symbolic entrance to the underworld.

Many rooms were plastered on the inside and decorated with painted designs.

The Anasazi lived in the cliff houses for less than a hundred years. By 1300 Mesa Verde was deserted. Here is another mystery. We know that the last quarter of the century was a time of drought and crop failures. Maybe after hundreds of years of intensive use the land and its resources—the soil, the forests, and animals—were depleted.

When the Anasazi left, they may have traveled south into New Mexico and Arizona, perhaps settling among their kin already there. Whatever happened, it seems likely that some Pueblo Indians today are descendants of the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde.



Mesa Verde

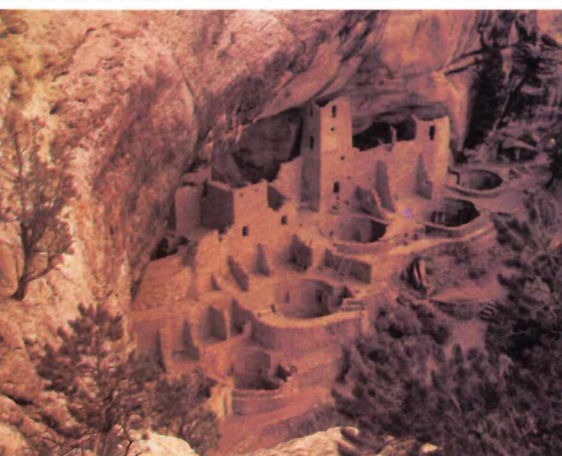
Regulations

The Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 prohibit the appropriation, injury, destruction, or removal of any object of antiquity or the excavation, injury, or destruction of any ruin on Federal land. Entering a cliff dwelling without a park ranger present will result in a citation and fine. Feeding, capturing, or teasing wildlife and picking, cutting, or damaging any wildflower, shrub, or tree is also prohibited.

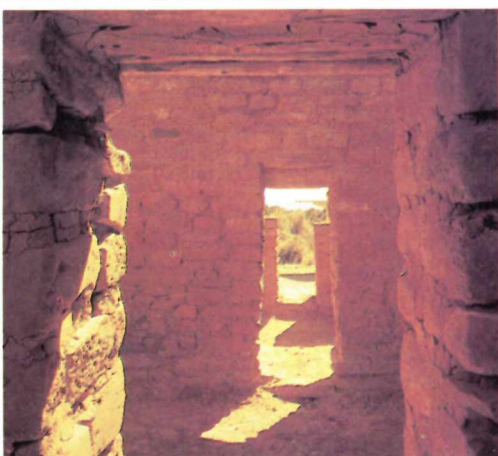
☐ Pets must be physically restrained at all times; they are not allowed in public buildings or on trails. ☐ Be careful with fire. One careless match can wipe out the growth of a lifetime. ☐ Firearms are prohibited. They must be broken down or otherwise packed while in the park. ☐ Motor vehicles are allowed only on roadways, turnouts, or parking areas. All accidents or injuries should be reported to a park ranger. ☐ Camping is permitted only in designated campgrounds. ☐

To protect fragile ruins, hiking is restricted to five trails within the park. ☐ Please don't litter. Use the trash cans located throughout the park.

Administration
Mesa Verde National Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado 81330, is in charge.



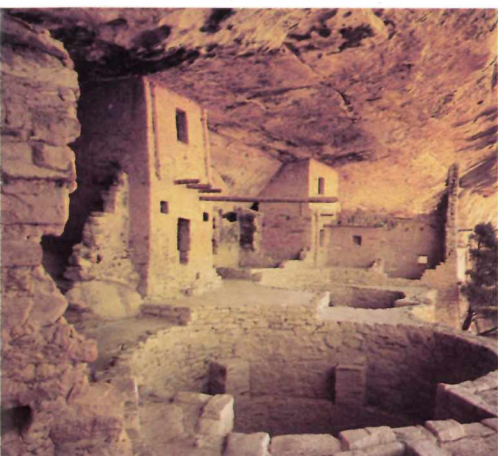
Cliff Palace



Doorways in Far View House



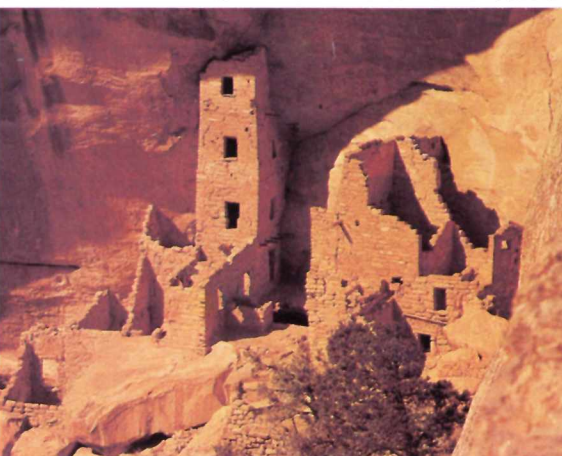
Restored Basketmaker
pithouse in Step House
Ruin, Wetherill Mesa



A kiva in Balcony House



Spruce Tree House



Square Tower House

About Your Visit

Mesa Verde National Park is located in the high plateau country of southwestern Colorado. The park entrance is midway between Cortez and Mancos, off U.S. 160. It is 21 miles from the entrance to park headquarters and the Chapin Mesa ruins. Morefield campground is 4 miles from the entrance; Far View Visitor Center is 15 miles. Allow at least 45 minutes for the drive to Chapin Mesa.

Park roads are scenic drives with sharp curves, steep grades, and reduced speed limits. For your safety, do not park on any roadway.

Mesa Verde is also accessible by common carrier. There are daily scheduled flights to Cortez and Durango; both towns have rental car service. The nearest railroad terminals are Grand Junction, Colo., and Gallup, N. Mex.; buses from those points serve Cortez. Buses run from Cortez to the park from mid-May to mid-October.

To See the Park
To get the most out of your visit, go first to either the Far View Visitor Center (open only in the summer) or to the Chapin Mesa Museum (open from 8 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. in summer and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the

year). Rangers there will help you plan your visit.

Take advantage of the park's many interpretive programs. Exhibits at Far View and Chapin Mesa illustrate the arts and crafts of both the prehistoric and historic Indians of the region. Guided tours and evening campfire programs are given in summer. Wayside exhibits throughout the park interpret the cliff-dwellings and other archeological remains. The sequence of aboriginal architectural development in Mesa Verde can be seen along Ruins Road on Chapin Mesa.

Services
Food, gasoline, and lodging are available only from May through October. No services are available the rest of the year. Full interpretive services begin in mid-June and continue through Labor Day.

Morefield campground, open mid-April through October, has single and group campsites. Six campsites (with restrooms) are accessible to physically impaired persons. All campsites have a table, benches, and a grill. The gathering of firewood or injuring of trees or shrubs is prohibited. Camps should not be left unattended for more than 24 hours. Some utility hook-ups are available, and there is a disposal station for

dumping trailer tanks. Near the park entrance are several commercial campgrounds.

Services at the campground include groceries, carry-out food, gasoline, firewood, showers, and a laundromat. Evening campfire programs are given daily from early June to September. During the summer non-denominational religious services are held. Three hiking trails originate in the Morefield area.

Park Point offers superb views of the entire Four Corners region. The fire lookout station here is staffed during the fire season. A brochure describes the natural features of the area.

Far View is a major center of visitor service. The visitor center, open from the end of May through September, displays contemporary Indian arts and crafts. Commercial tours of Chapin Mesa leave from Far View Motor Lodge. The motor lodge is open from May through October. For reservations, write ARA Mesa Verde Company, Box 277, Mancos, Colorado 81328. Telephone: 303-529-4421. There is a restaurant at the lodge and a cafeteria nearby; the gas station provides basic auto services.

Wetherill Mesa is accessible only during the summer and only by private vehicle between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Vehicles over 8,000 pounds GVW and/or over 25 feet in length are prohibited. The 12-mile mountain road to Wetherill has sharp curves and steep grades. Please obey the posted speed limits. Roadside pullouts offer spectacular views of the Four Corners region. Two cliff dwellings, Step House and Long House, are open to the public. Badger House Community, a mesa-top complex near Long House, is accessible over a ¼-mile trail. Rangers are on duty to interpret the sites. You can buy sandwiches and cold drinks at Wetherill.

Three major cliff dwellings on Chapin Mesa—Spruce Tree House, Cliff Palace, and Balcony House—are open for visits and many others are visible from Ruins Road. An archeological museum with dioramas and exhibits interpret the life of the ancient Anasazi. In summer, rangers conduct tours through the cliff dwellings. Current schedules are available at the museum or Far View Visitor Center.

Two hiking trails lead into Spruce Canyon. The Petroglyph Point Trail, 2.8 miles, and Spruce Canyon Trail, 2.1 miles, begin at points on the Spruce Tree House

Trail. Hikers must register at the ranger's office before attempting these trails.

Other cliff dwellings can be seen from canyon-rim vantage points by taking the self-guiding loop drives of Ruins Road. Wayside exhibits interpret the development of Anasazi culture from the Basketmakers through the Classic period. These roads are open from 8 a.m. until sunset, but are often closed during the winter months. Visitors may snowshoe or crosscountry ski as snow conditions permit.

At Spruce Tree Terrace, open from early spring through fall, light snacks, gifts, souvenirs, and bicycle rentals are available. In winter, guided tours are offered to Spruce Tree House, weather and trail conditions permitting.

A guidebook for disabled visitors is available at all ranger stations.

For Your Safety
Visits to cliff dwellings are strenuous. Altitudes in the park vary from 6,000 to 8,500 feet. Trails may be uneven; steps and ladders must frequently be climbed. Hiking is not recommended for persons with heart or respiratory ailments.

All major cliff dwelling can be viewed from overlooks on the canyon rims.

Parents should be alert for their children's safety when near the canyon rims. Do not throw rocks or other objects into the canyons—there may be people below.

Bicycling is permitted in the park, but there are no designated lanes.

Emergency first aid is provided at the Chapin Mes and Morefield ranger stations

Park roads and trails may be hazardous in winter. Stop at the entrance gate for current information on road conditions and tour schedules.

Crime Prevention
Park visitors can be the target of professional thieves who rob locked vehicles and campsites. Take your valuables with you or leave them in a secure place. Locked cars and trunks are not completely safe. Report all thefts immediately to the nearest ranger station.

Photographs by David Muench

