

The Mesa Top

The Mesa Verde people 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 people cut for building

materials and firewood and to clear land for farming. They reached their fields over hand-and-toe-hold trails pecked into the canyon walls.

Farming

The Mesa Verde people grew their staple crops of squash, corn, and beans in fields scattered across the mesa tops. They worked the soil with a digging stick and often built check dams along draws to catch and hold rain and snow.

The World of the Mesa Verde People

About 1,400 years ago, long before any European exploration of North America, a group of people living in the Four Corners region chose Mesa Verde for their home. For more than 700 years their descendants lived and flourished here, eventually building elaborate stone communities in the sheltered alcoves of the canyon walls. Then in the late 1200s, within the span of one or two generations, they left 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 reminder of this 1,000-year-old culture. Archeologists have called these people Anasazi, from a Navajo word that has sometimes been translated to mean "the ancient enemies." We now call them the Ancestral Puebloans, reflecting their modern descendants. Ever since local cowboys first saw 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 scientific 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 structures speak with a certain eloquence. They tell of a people adept at building, artistic in their crafts, and skillful at making a living from a difficult land. The structures 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 (1100 to 1300), the people 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 North America.

Taking advantage of nature, the Ancestral Puebloans built their dwellings beneath 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 feet, 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. Pottery was fashioned there, as well as various tools—knives, axes, awls, scrapers—made from stone and bone. Fires

built in summer were mainly for cooking. In winter, when the alcove 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 several months each year.

Clothing closely followed the seasons. In summer the adults probably 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.

The Ancestral Puebloans spent much of their time getting food, even in the best of years. Farming was the main business of these people, but they supplemented their crops of beans, corn, 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 Ancestral Puebloans tossed their trash close by. Scrap of food, broken pottery and tools, anything unwanted, went down the slope in front of their homes. Much of what we know about daily life here comes from these garbage heaps.

The Anasazi Family

Archeology has yielded some information about the ancient people of Mesa Verde, but without a written record 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 was probably 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 three members of the idealized Ancestral Puebloan family pictured above are dressed for winter in hides, leather-cloth robes, and warm footwear. The skills of these people as hunters and potters 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 is attired for a warmer time of year. He holds a stone-tipped digging stick and wears sandals made of yucca, a useful native plant.

Trade

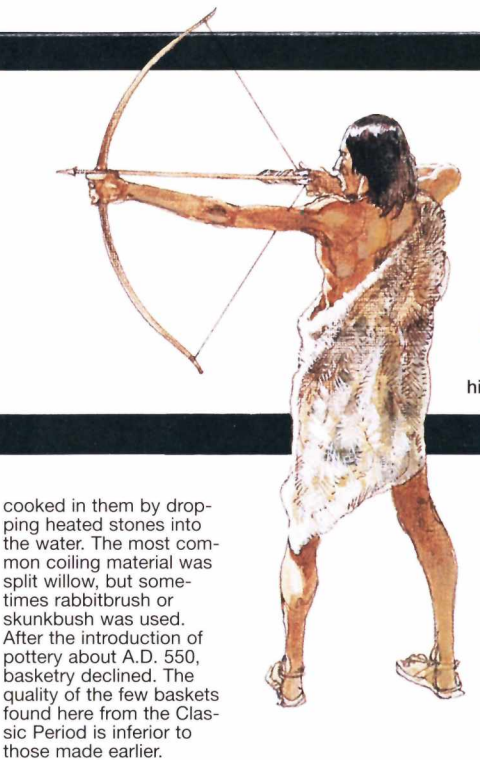
Mesa Verde's economy was more complex than it might appear to be at first glance. Even within a small agricultural community, there undoubtedly were persons more skilled than others at weaving or leather-working or making pottery, arrowpoints, jewelry, baskets, sandals, or other specialized articles.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

shared or bartered with neighbors. This exchange went on between communities, too. Seashells from the Pacific coast and 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.

Tools

The Ancestral Puebloans used all available materials, without metal of any kind. They skillfully fashioned 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 baskets produced by the Mesa Verde people were made before they learned how to make pottery. Using the spiral twilled 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

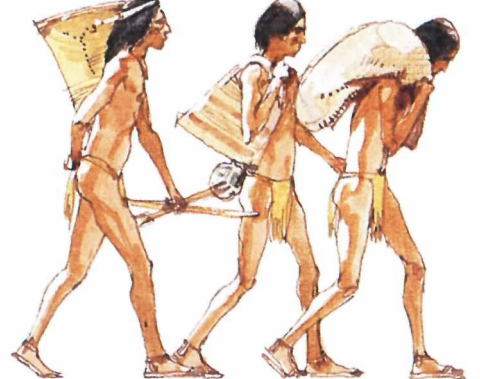
cooked in them by dropping heated stones into the water. The most common coiling material was split willow, but sometimes rabbitbrush or skunkbush was used. After the introduction of pottery about A.D. 550, basketry declined. The quality of the few baskets found here from the Classic Period is inferior to those made earlier.

Pottery



The people of Mesa Verde were accomplished potters. They made vessels of all kinds: pots, bowls, canteens, ladles, jars, and mugs. Corrugated ware was used mostly for cooking and storage; the elaborately decorated black-on-white ware may have had ceremonial, as well as everyday uses. Women were probably the potters

of the community. Their designs tended to be personal and local, and most likely were passed down from mother to daughter. Design elements changed slowly, a characteristic that helps archeologists track the location and composition of early populations.



The Living Past

The first Ancestral Puebloans 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 (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 then 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, square 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 people lived in this type of dwelling from about 550 to 750.

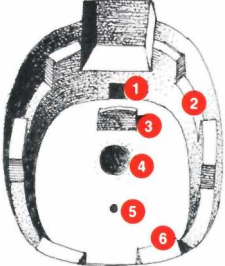
By 1000 the people of Mesa Verde had advanced from pole-and-adobe construction to skillful stone masonry. Their walls of thick, double-coursed stone often rose two or three stories high and were joined together into units of 50 rooms or more. Pottery also changed, as black drawings on a white background replaced simple 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 toolmaking. 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 quality 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 people began to move back into the cliff alcoves that had sheltered their ancestors long centuries before. We do not know why they made this move. Perhaps it was for defense; perhaps the alcoves 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 most famous.

Most of the cliff dwellings were built from the late 1190s to the late 1270s. They range in size from one-room houses to villages of more than 200 rooms—Cliff Palace. Architecturally, there is no standard ground plan. The builders fit their structures to the available space. Most walls were single courses of stone, perhaps because the alcove 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. Many rooms were plastered on the inside and decorated with painted designs.

The Kiva



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

Kiva is a Hopi word for ceremonial room. The kivas at Mesa Verde were underground chambers that may be compared to churches of later times. Based upon modern Pueblo practice, Ancestral Puebloans may have used these rooms to conduct healing rites or to pray for rain, luck in hunting, or good crops. Kivas also served as gathering places, and sometimes as a place to weave. A roof of beams and mud covered each kiva, supported by pilasters. Access was by ladder through a hole in the center of the roof. The small hole in the floor is a sipapu, the symbolic entrance to the underworld.

The Ancestral Puebloans lived in the cliff dwellings for less than 100 years. By about 1300 Mesa Verde was deserted. There are several theories about the reasons for their migration. We know that the last quarter of the century was a time of drought and crop failures, but these people had survived earlier droughts. Maybe after hundreds of years of intensive use the land and its resources—the soil, the forests, and the animals—were depleted. Perhaps there were social and political problems, and the people looked for new opportunities elsewhere.

When the people of Mesa Verde left, they traveled south into New Mexico and Arizona, settling among their kin already there. Whatever happened, some of today's Pueblo people, and perhaps other tribes, are descendants of the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde.

Painting by Roy Andersen

Exploring Mesa Verde



Spruce Tree House
Laurence Parent



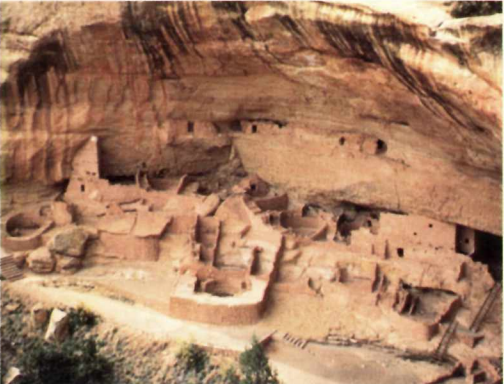
Restored Basketmaker pithouse in Step House
Laurence Parent



Square Tower House
Laurence Parent



A kiva in Balcony House
Laurence Parent



Long House
NPS



Cliff Palace
Laurence Parent

Mesa Verde's elevation and southward slope created conditions more favorable to early human habitation than in the lands below the mesa. Mesa Verde National Park was created in 1906 to preserve the dwelling sites of Ancestral Puebloans, both atop the mesa and in large alcoves in the walls of the deep sandstone canyons cutting through the mesa. The park includes more than 4,000 archeological sites, approximately 600 of which are cliff dwellings.

Mesa Verde National Park can be reached by air, with daily flights into Cortez and Durango, and rail (terminals in Grand Junction, Colo., and Gallup, N.Mex.); buses from those points serve Cortez. The park's only entrance and the main park road are open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. To get the most out of your visit, go first to the Far View Visitor Center (open from early April to mid-October), or to the Chapin Mesa Museum (open all year). The museum and the Chapin Mesa archeological sites are 21 miles from the park entrance; allow at least 45 minutes. Far View is 15 miles. Bicycling is permitted on the park's public roads except for Wetherill Mesa. There are no designated bicycle lanes; bicycling is not recommended. Trail riding is not permitted. Trailers and towed vehicles are not permitted beyond Morefield Campground. *All towed vehicles must be parked at the entrance parking area or at the Morefield Campground.*

Programs and Services Three of the cliff dwellings—Balcony House and Cliff Palace on Chapin Mesa and Long House on Wetherill Mesa—require tickets. They can be purchased at Far View Visitor Center. Exhibits on the arts and

crafts of the region are offered at Far View Visitor Center and Chapin Mesa. Far View is a major center of visitor services. Concession tours of Chapin Mesa leave from the Far View Lodge. The lodge and associated services are available from April through early November. For reservations, write to ARAMARK Mesa Verde, Box 277, Mancos, CO 81328, or phone 1-800-449-2288. There is a restaurant at the lodge and a cafeteria and gift shop nearby.

Camping Morefield Campground, open from mid-April to mid-October, has single and group campsites available on a first-come, first-served basis. All campsites have a picnic table and fire-place with grill. Gathering firewood or injuring trees or shrubs is prohibited. Camps should not be left unattended for more than 24 hours. Some utility hookups are available, and there is a dump station for recreational vehicles. Services at the campground include groceries, carry-out food, gasoline, firewood, showers, and a laundromat. Camping is limited to 14 days. There are several commercial campgrounds near the park entrance.

Hiking and Backpacking Overnight backpacking and cross-country hiking are not allowed in the park. Hiking is permitted only on the park's designated trails. Hikers must register for the Petroglyph Point and Spruce Canyon trails. It is essential that hikers carry water during summer months. Trails can be muddy and slippery after rain; proper footwear is essential. Visitors with health problems should be aware that all trails except Soda Canyon Overlook Trail and Knife

Edge Trail are strenuous, with steep elevation changes. All trails are closed by snow in winter.

For Your Safety and Protection Visits to cliff dwellings can be strenuous. Many trails are steep and uneven; there are steps and ladders to be climbed. Hiking or visiting cliff dwellings is not recommended for those with heart or respiratory problems. Most of the major cliff dwellings can be seen from overlooks. Parents should be alert for their children's safety, especially at the sites and near canyon rims. Do not throw rocks or other objects into the canyons—there may be people below. Emergency first aid is provided at the Chapin Mesa and Morefield ranger stations. Park roads have sharp curves and steep grades. Do not park on any roadway; there are pullouts throughout the park. Roads and trails may be hazardous in winter; ask for current information at the entrance station.

Park visitors can be targets of professional thieves who rob campsites or parked vehicles. 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.

Accessibility Overlooks, which are wheelchair-accessible with assistance, provide excellent views of cliff dwellings. Wheelchairs with wide-rim wheels are recommended. Trails in the park may not meet legal grade requirements. An accessibility brochure is available at all ranger stations, Far View Visitor Center, and Chapin Mesa Museum.

Regulations Visitors found hiking away from trails or entering a cliff dwelling unaccompanied by a uniformed National Park Service employee are subject to penalties. Camping is permitted only in the designated campground. These restrictions are necessary to protect the fragile archeological sites. • Feeding, capturing, or teasing wildlife and picking, cutting, or damaging any wildflower, shrub, or tree is prohibited. • Pets must be physically restrained at all times; animals 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, pullouts, or parking areas. Report all accidents or injuries to a park ranger.

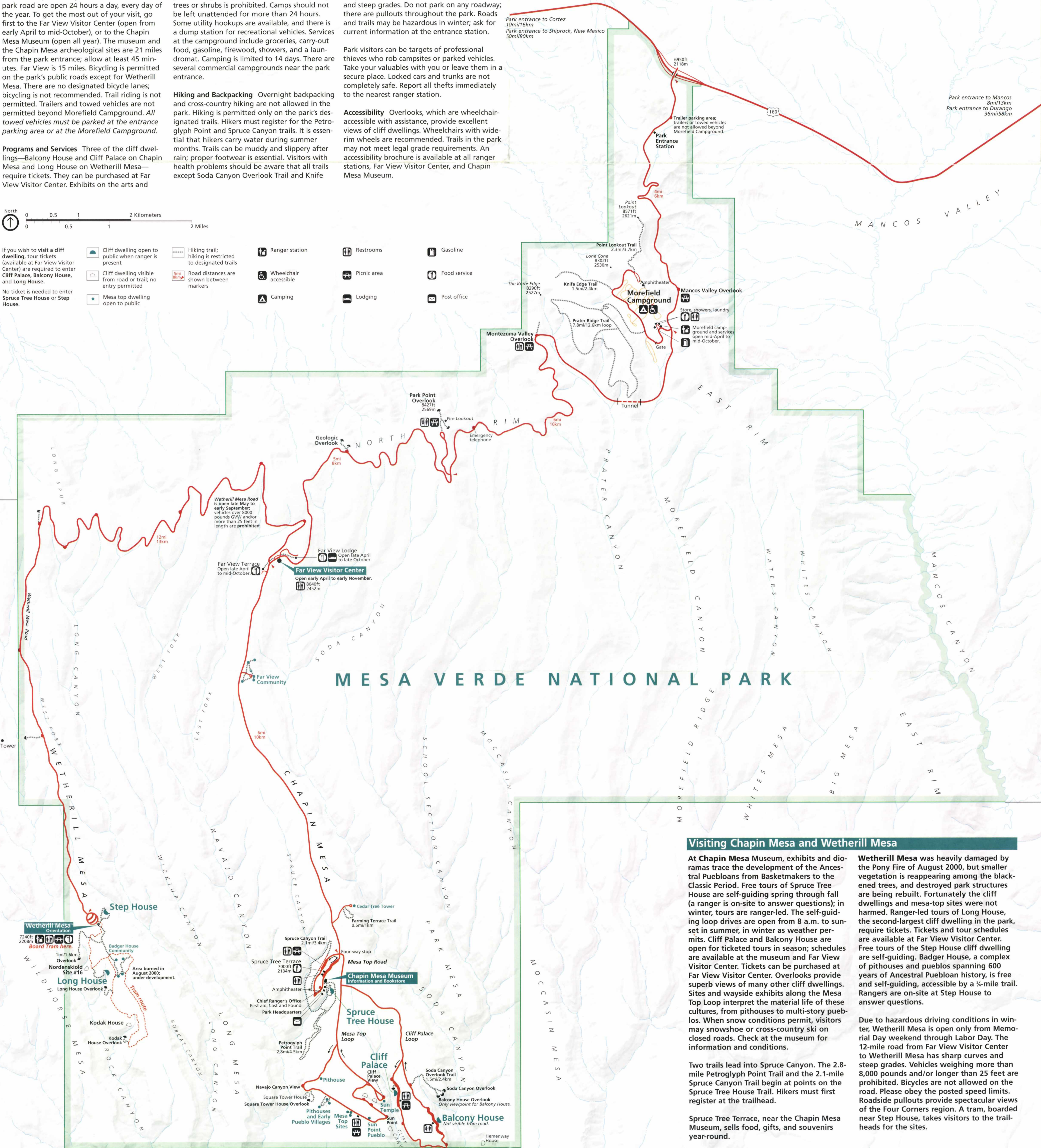
Most of the cliff dwellings remain unexcavated and are not open to the public. The Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 prohibit the excavation, injury, or destruction of any archeological site on federal land and the defacing, destruction, or removal of any object of antiquity within the park. The latter act provides for fines of up to \$100,000 and imprisonment for up to 20 years for violations. The sites in the

park are fragile. Please treat them gently so they remain to provide understanding and pleasure to others.

For More Information Mesa Verde National Park P.O. Box 8 Mesa Verde National Park, CO 81330 970-529-4465 www.nps.gov/meve

Visit the National Park Service website at www.nps.gov.

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Visiting Chapin Mesa and Wetherill Mesa

At Chapin Mesa Museum, exhibits and dioramas trace the development of the Ancestral Puebloans from Basketmakers to the Classic Period. Free tours of Spruce Tree House are self-guiding spring through fall (a ranger is on-site to answer questions); in winter, tours are ranger-led. The self-guiding loop drives are open from 8 a.m. to sunset in summer, in winter as weather permits. Cliff Palace and Balcony House are open for ticketed tours in season; schedules are available at the museum and Far View Visitor Center. Tickets can be purchased at Far View Visitor Center. Overlooks provide superb views of many other cliff dwellings. Sites and wayside exhibits along the Mesa Top Loop interpret the material life of these cultures, from pithouses to multi-story pueblos. When snow conditions permit, visitors may snowshoe or cross-country ski on closed roads. Check at the museum for information and conditions.

Two trails lead into Spruce Canyon. The 2.8-mile Petroglyph Point Trail and the 2.1-mile Spruce Canyon Trail begin at points on the Spruce Tree House Trail. Hikers must first register at the trailhead.

Spruce Tree Terrace, near the Chapin Mesa Museum, sells food, gifts, and souvenirs year-round.

Wetherill Mesa was heavily damaged by the Pony Fire of August 2000, but smaller vegetation is reappearing among the blackened trees, and destroyed park structures are being rebuilt. Fortunately the cliff dwellings and mesa-top sites were not harmed. Ranger-led tours of Long House, the second-largest cliff dwelling in the park, require tickets. Tickets and tour schedules are available at Far View Visitor Center. Free tours of the Step House cliff dwelling are self-guiding. Badger House, a complex of pithouses and pueblos spanning 600 years of Ancestral Puebloan history, is free and self-guiding, accessible by a ¼-mile trail. Rangers are on-site at Step House to answer questions.

Due to hazardous driving conditions in winter, Wetherill Mesa is open only from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day. The 12-mile road from Far View Visitor Center to Wetherill Mesa has sharp curves and steep grades. Vehicles weighing more than 8,000 pounds and/or longer than 25 feet are prohibited. Bicycles are not allowed on the road. Please obey the posted speed limits. Roadside pullouts provide spectacular views of the Four Corners region. A tram, boarded near Step House, takes visitors to the trailheads for the sites.