

On the Mesa Tops
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. The people cut pinyon and juniper for building materials and firewood and to clear land for farming. They reached their fields by hand-and-toe-hold trails pecked into the canyon walls.

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

Ancestral Puebloans and Their World

About 1,400 years ago, long before Europeans explored North America, a group of people living in the Four Corners region chose Mesa Verde for their home. For more than 700 years they and their descendants lived and flourished here, eventually building elaborate stone communities in the sheltered alcoves of canyon walls. Then, in the late 1200s, in the span of a generation or two, they left their homes and moved away.

Mesa Verde National Park preserves a spectacular reminder of this ancient culture. Archeologists have called these people Anasazi, from a Navajo word sometimes translated as "the ancient foreigners." We now call them Ancestral Puebloans, reflecting their modern descendants.

Ever since local cowboys first reported the cliff dwellings in the 1880s, archeologists have sought to understand these people's lives. But despite decades of excavation, analysis, classification, and comparison, scientific knowledge remains sketchy. We will never know the whole story: 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 centuries, accumulated skills and traditions and passed them on from generation to generation. By the Classic Period, from 1100 to 1300, Ancestral Puebloans were heirs of a vigorous civilization, whose accomplishments in community living and the arts must be ranked among the finest expressions of human culture in North America.

Using nature to advantage, Ancestral Puebloans built their dwellings beneath the overhanging cliffs. Their basic construction material was sandstone that they shaped into rectangular blocks about the size of a loaf of bread. The mortar between the blocks was a mix of dirt and water. Living rooms averaged about six feet by eight feet, space enough for two or three persons. Isolated rooms in the rear and on the upper levels were generally used for storing crops. They were experienced builders, as the construction testifies. Walls are tall and straight and have withstood the tests of time and the elements.

Many daily activities took place in open courtyards in front of the rooms. Fires built in summer were mainly for cooking. In winter, when 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.

Ancestral Puebloans spent much of their time getting food, even in the best years. Farming was their main work, but they supplemented 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, Ancestral Puebloans tossed their trash close by—scraps of food, broken pottery and tools, anything not wanted, went down the slope in front of their homes. Much of what we know about daily life here comes from these garbage heaps.

Someone standing across the canyon from Spruce Tree House in the mid-1200s could have witnessed a scene like the illustration above. This was one of the largest villages in Mesa Verde. It had 129 rooms and eight kivas. Some 60 to 90 persons lived here at any time.

The season depicted is autumn, the villagers' busiest time of year. The harvest is underway. Some men are still gleaning the fields, while others are spreading the 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 telling stories. Hundreds of years before this village was built, their ancestors probably lived in pithouses in this same shelter.

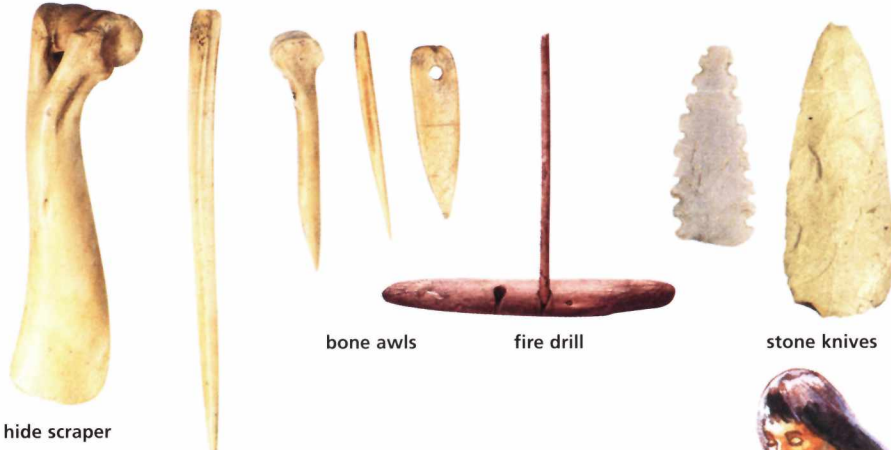
This scene is conjectural but entirely plausible. We probably will never know a great deal more about these people than we do today.

Tools

Ancestral Puebloans used all available materials, with no metals. From locally available trees, plants, animals, and stone they made tools for grinding, cutting, pounding, chopping, scraping, perforating, polishing, and weaving.

They used the digging stick for farming, stone axe for clearing land, 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 animal hides. Other than the mano and metate, most stone tools were made from stream cobbles, not the soft, cliff sandstone.

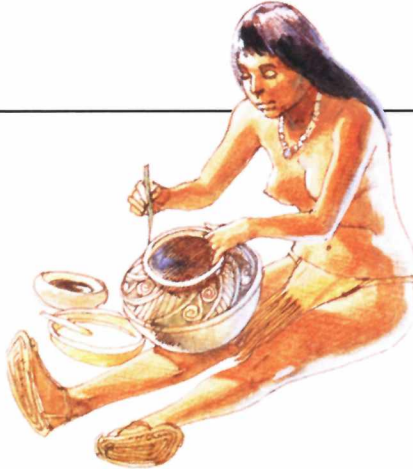


Basketry and Pottery

The finest baskets made at Mesa Verde were created before the people learned how to make pottery. Using the spiral twilled technique (right), they wove handsomely decorated baskets of many sizes and shapes and used them for carrying

water, storing grain, and even for cooking. They waterproofed 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 550, basketry declined. The few baskets found here from the Classic Period, 1100 to 1300, are not as well made as the earlier baskets.



These were very accomplished potters, making vessels of many kinds including pots, bowls, canteens, ladles, jars, and mugs. Corrugated ware was used mostly for cooking and storage, while the elaborately decorated,

smooth-surfaced black-on-white wares may have had both ceremonial and everyday uses. Women were probably the potters. Designs tended to be personal and local and most likely were passed down from mother to daughter.

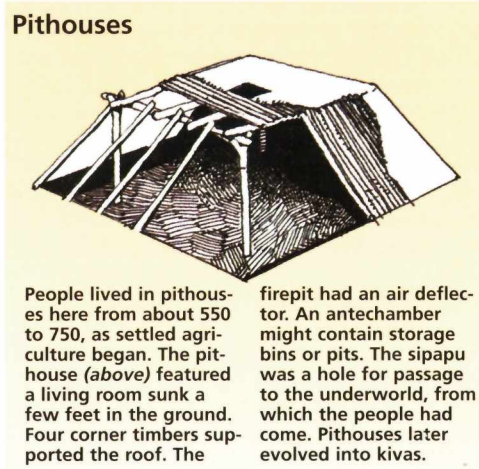
Design elements changed slowly, a characteristic that helps archeologists and modern descendants date and possibly track the location of early populations.



Before the Cliff Dwellers

The first Ancestral Puebloans settled in Mesa Verde (Spanish for "green table") 1,400 years ago. They are known as Basketmakers for their skill at the craft. Formerly nomadic, they were beginning to lead a more settled way of life. Farming replaced hunting and gathering as their main livelihood. They lived in pithouses clustered into small villages usually built on mesa tops but sometimes in cliff recesses. They learned to make pottery and acquired the bow and arrow, a more efficient weapon for hunting than the atlatl, a spear thrower.

These were fairly prosperous times for the Basketmakers, and their population multiplied. About the year 750 they began to build houses above ground, with upright walls fashioned of poles and mud. They built their houses one against another in long, curving rows, often with a pithouse or two in front. (Pithouses would later evolve into kivas.) From then on, these people are known as Pueblos, a Spanish word meaning "village dwellers."



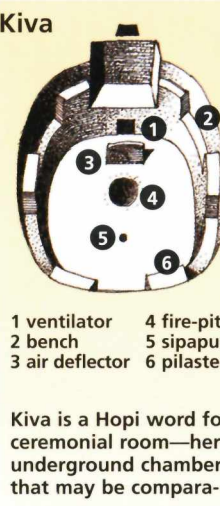
People lived in pithouses here from about 550 to 750, as settled agriculture began. The pithouse (above) featured a living room sunk a few feet in the ground. Four corner timbers supported the roof. The firepit had an air deflector. An antechamber might contain storage bins or pits. The sipapu was a hole for passage to the underworld, from which the people had come. Pithouses later evolved into kivas.

By 1000 the people of Mesa Verde had advanced from pole-and-adobe construction to skillful stone masonry. 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 a dull gray background. Farming accounted for more of their diet than before, and much mesa-top land was cleared for agriculture.

Between 1100 and 1300, the 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. The stone walls of the large pueblos are regarded as the finest ever built in Mesa Verde, with their straight courses of carefully shaped stones. Baskets show evidence of decline in quality, possibly because widespread use of pottery meant less attention to the craft. About 1200, another major population shift saw people begin to

move back into the cliff alcoves that sheltered their ancestors centuries before. Why did they make this move? We don't know: perhaps for defense; perhaps alcoves offered better protection from the elements; perhaps for religious or psychological reasons. Whatever the reason, or 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 late 1270s. They range in size from one-room houses to villages of more than 150 rooms—Cliff Palace. Architecturally, there is no standard ground plan. Builders fit the structures to the available space. Most walls were single courses of stone, perhaps because alcove roofs limited heights and protected the walls from erosion by the weather. Masonry work varied in quality—rough construction is found alongside walls of well-shaped stones. Many rooms were plastered on the inside and decorated with painted designs.



Kiva is a Hopi word for ceremonial room—here underground chambers that may be comparable to later churches. Based on modern Pueblo practice, Ancestral Puebloans may have used kivas for healing rites or to pray for rain, luck in hunting, or a good crop.

Kivas were gathering places and sometimes also places to weave. Pilasters supported a beam-and-mud roof. Entry was by ladder through a hole in the center of the roof. The small hole in the floor (left) is a sipapu, or symbolic entrance to the underworld.

Ancestral Puebloans lived in the cliff dwellings for less than 100 years. By about 1300 Mesa Verde was deserted. Several theories offer reasons for their migration. We do know that the last quarter of the 1200s saw drought and crop failures—but these people had survived earlier droughts. Maybe after hundreds of years of intensive use the land and its resources—soils, forests, and animals—were depleted. Perhaps there were social and political problems, and the people simply looked for new opportunities elsewhere.

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

Exploring Mesa Verde



Spruce Tree House
Laurence Parent



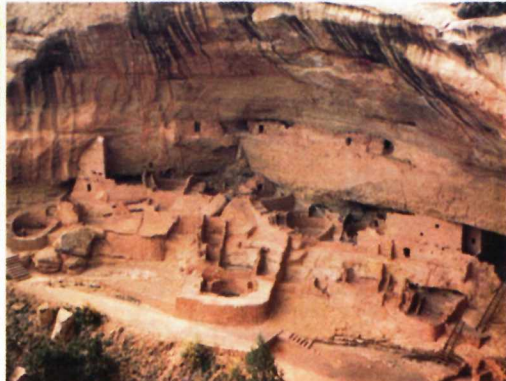
Restored Basketmaker pithouse in Step House
Laurence Parent



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 4,500 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-May 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, 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. Be alert for falling rocks. 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.

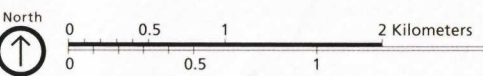
Most of the cliff dwellings remain unexcavated and are not open to the public. The Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 prohibit the excavation, injury, or destruction of any archeological site on federal land and the defacing, destruction, or removal 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

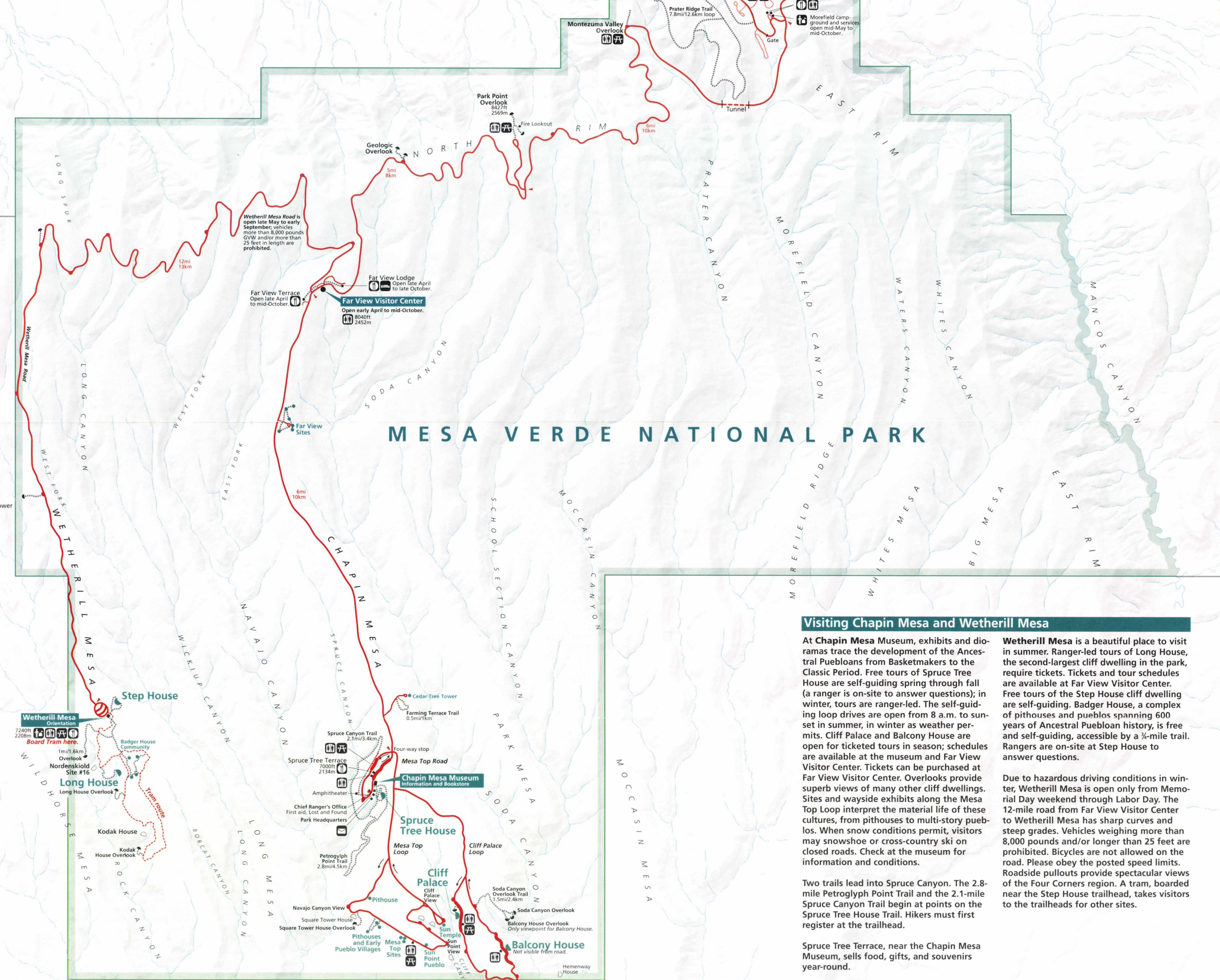
Visit the National Park Service website at www.nps.gov.

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If you wish to visit a cliff dwelling, tour tickets (available at Far View Visitor Center) are required to enter Cliff Palace, Balcony House, and Long House. No ticket is needed to enter Spruce Tree House or Step House.

Cliff dwelling open to public when ranger is present
Cliff dwelling visible from road or trail; no entry permitted
Hiking trail; hiking is restricted to designated trails
Road distances are shown between markers
Ranger station
Wheelchair-accessible
Restrooms
Picnic area
Food service
Post office
Camping
Lodging



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 is a beautiful place to visit in summer. 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 the Step House trailhead, takes visitors to the trailheads for other sites.