

On the Mesa Tops

Ancestral Pueblo people grew crops and hunted game on the mesa tops. Hand-and-toe-hold trails connected the mesa-top fields to alcove villages and canyons below. The soil was fertile and, except in drought, about as well watered as today. The vegetation is probably about the same. There may have been fewer standing trees and snags. The ancient people cut pinyon and juniper for building materials, firewood, and to clear fields; recent wildfires have left many standing snags.

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 across draws to catch and hold rain and snow.

Ancestral Pueblo People and Their World

About AD 550, long before Europeans explored North America, some of the people living in the Four Corners region decided to move onto the Mesa Verde. For over 700 years these people and their descendants lived and flourished here, eventually building elaborate stone communities in the sheltered alcoves of canyon walls. 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 for-eigners.” We now call them Ancestral Pueblo people, reflecting their modern descendants.

Local ranchers first reported the cliff dwellings in the 1880s and since then archeologists have sought to understand the lives of the people who lived there. Despite decades of excavation, analysis, classification, and comparison, our knowledge is incomplete. The cliff dwellings speak eloquently 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

Pueblo Period, from 1150 to 1300, Ancestral Pueblo people 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 their advantage, about AD 1200 Ancestral Pueblo people began to build their villages 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 people. Isolated rooms in the rear and on the upper levels were generally used for storing crops. The construction testifies they were experienced builders.

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 Pueblo people spent much of their time getting food, even in the best years. They grew most of their food, but supplemented crops of beans, corn, and squash by gathering wild plants and hunting deer, rabbits, squirrels, and other animals. Their only domestic animals were dogs and turkeys. Fortunately, Ancestral Pueblo people 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 130 rooms and eight kivas. Some 60 to 90 people 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 rooftop 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 pit houses in this same alcove.

Family Life at Mesa Verde

This Ancestral Puebloan family (left) is wearing hides, warm footwear, and feather-cloth robes for winter. The turkey was important in their economy—providing food, feathers used in weaving, and bones used for tools.

Archeology has yielded some facts about Mesa Verde’s ancient people, but without a written record we cannot be sure about their social, political, or religious ideas. We must rely for insight on comparisons with modern Pueblo people of New Mexico and Arizona.

In the Classic Pueblo Period at Mesa Verde (from 1150 to 1300) several generations probably lived together as a household.

Each family occupied several rooms and built additional rooms as it grew. Several related families likely made up a clan, probably matrilineal, that traced descent through the woman’s line. Based on current Hopi practices, each clan would have had its own kiva and its own agricultural plots.

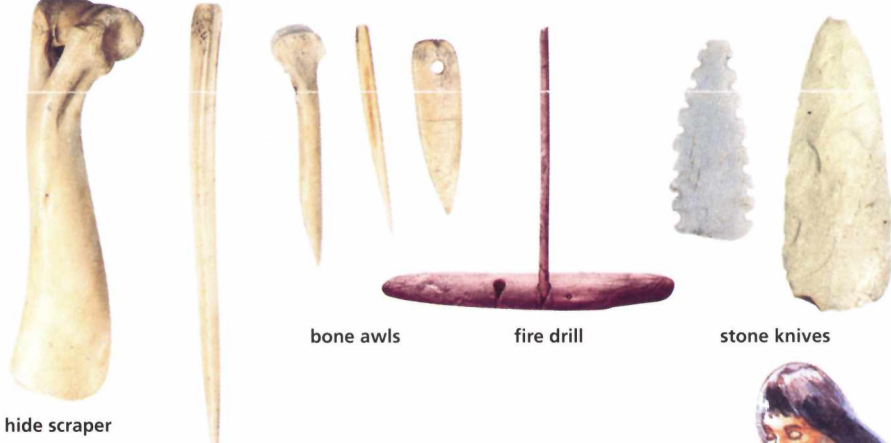
Tools

Ancestral Pueblo people 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 or clay spindle whorls for spinning. 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.

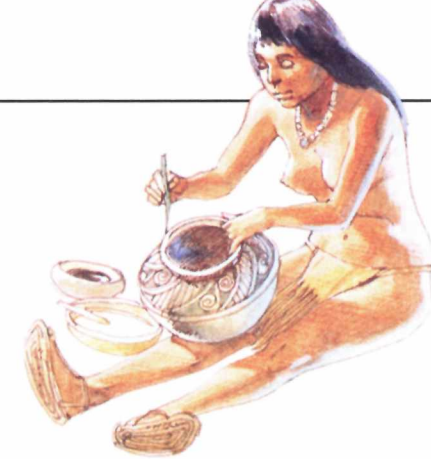


Basketry and Pottery

The finest baskets made at Mesa Verde were created before the people developed fired ceramic 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 made baskets waterproof 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 skunk-

bush was used. As pottery-making techniques advanced about AD 550, basket-making declined. The few baskets found here from the Classic Period are not as well made as earlier baskets.



These accomplished potters made vessels of many kinds, including bowls, canteens, ladles, jars, and mugs. Corrugated ware was used mostly for cooking and storage. 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 over time, which helps archeologists and modern descendants date and possibly track locations of early populations.

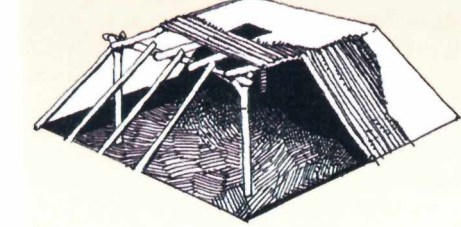


Before the Cliff Dwellers

The first Ancestral Pueblo people settled in Mesa Verde (Spanish for “green table”) about AD 550. Archeologists call this early period “Basketmaker” to reflect the finely crafted baskets made then. The people farmed corn, beans, and squash, hunted wild animals, and gathered a wide variety of edible and useful plants. They made ingenious tools from stone, wood, and bone, and built pit houses for homes. Pit houses were often clustered as small villages on mesa tops and in cliff alcoves. The people became prolific potters and acquired the bow and arrow, a more efficient hunting weapon than the atlatl, an ancient type of spear thrower.

These were fairly prosperous times for the people, and their population grew. About AD 750 some people 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 pit house or two in front. Pit houses would later

Pit houses



People lived in pit houses here from about AD 550 to 750. The pit house (above) was dug into the ground and featured four corner timbers that supported the roof. The firepit had an air deflector to help air circulate

through the room. An antechamber might contain storage bins or pits. Some pit houses included a *sipapu*, a small hole in the floor, which may have had important symbolic meanings.

evolve into kivas. Archeologists call this period “Pueblo,” Spanish for town or village, to reflect this architectural change.

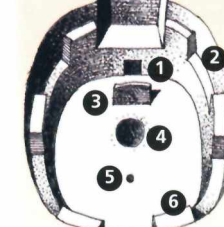
By AD 1000, architectural skills had advanced from pole-and-adobe construction to stone masonry. Walls of thick, double-coursed stone often rose two or three stories high and were joined as units of 50 rooms or more. Pottery also evolved, as black drawings on a white background replaced simple designs on a dull gray background. Farming accounted for more of their diet than before, and much mesa-top land was cleared for agriculture.

Between 1150 and 1300, the Classic Pueblo Period, thousands of people lived on Mesa Verde. Many lived in compact villages of several rooms, often with kivas or courtyards. Carefully shaped building stones, finely built and plastered wall surfaces, and advancing artistry in pottery-making characterize this period. About 1225, another major population shift saw people

moving 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 for better protection from the elements; perhaps for religious or other reasons. Whatever the events and circumstances, the people began to build 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 from one-room houses to community centers of about 150 rooms: Cliff Palace and Long House. 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 height and protected the walls from weather erosion. 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



Kiva comes from the Hopi language and is used in Mesa Verde to refer to round chambers, usually under-

ground, built in or near almost every village or homestead. Most have similar features (see sketch) and were likely used for combined religious, social, and utilitarian purposes. Entry was by ladder through a hole in the center of the roof.

The roof, made of timbers, juniper bark, and mud, often formed part of a plaza or public space. In modern Pueblo communities the kiva is still an important ceremonial structure.

Ancestral Pueblo people 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 they had survived earlier droughts. Maybe after hundreds of years of intensive use the land and its 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 joined thousands of other Ancestral Pueblo people who were moving south into today’s New Mexico and Arizona, settling among their kin or establishing new communities. Today the Hopi of northern Arizona and the people of Zuni, Laguna, Acoma, and the pueblos along the Rio Grande trace their ancestry to the Ancestral Pueblo people of this area. Some are descendants of the ancient builders of Mesa Verde.

Exploring Mesa Verde—A World Heritage Site



Spruce Tree House
© LAURENCE PARENT



Restored Basketmaker pit house 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 National Park was created in 1906 to preserve the archeological heritage of the Ancestral Pueblo people, both atop the mesas and in the cliff dwellings below. The park includes over 4,500 archeological sites; only 600 are cliff dwellings. Plan to spend at least a full day discovering the opportunities in the park.

Getting Here Mesa Verde National Park can be reached by air, with daily flights into Cortez and Durango, and from rail terminals in Grand Junction, CO, and Gallup, NM; buses from those points serve Cortez. The park's only entrance and main park road are open 24 hours all year.

Visitor Centers To get the most from your trip, start at the Visitor and Research Center, located just east of the park exit ramp off US 160. Open year-round. Rangers, exhibits, and a bookstore. Chapin Mesa Archeological Museum, 21 miles (45 minutes) from the park entrance, is open all year. Exhibits and dioramas trace the development of the Ancestral Pueblo people.

Interpretive Programs To see Balcony House, Cliff Palace, and Long House, you must join a ranger-guided tour. Tickets are required and are sold at the Visitor and Research Center. Interpretive programs are offered year-round. Check the park website and visitor guide for more information.

Visitor Services Far View Lodge and associated services (lodging and restaurant, cafeteria and gift shop nearby) are available from late April through late October. For reservations contact: Aramark Mesa Verde, PO Box 277, Mancos, CO 81328, 1-800-449-2288; www.visitmesaverde.com. Concession bus tours of Chapin Mesa leave from Far View Lodge.

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

Camping Morefield Campground, open mid-May to mid-October, has single and group campsites, first-come, first-served. Campsites have tables and fireplaces with grills. Some have utility hookups. There is an RV dump station. Campground services: groceries, carry-out food, firewood, showers, and laundromat. Camping limited to 14 days. Commercial campgrounds are near the park entrance.

Hiking and Backpacking Hike on designated trails only. No overnight backpacking or crosscountry hiking is allowed in the park. Hikers must register at the trailhead or museum for Petroglyph Point and Spruce Canyon trails. Hikers must carry water in summer. 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 include

steep elevation changes. Trails are closed by snow in winter.

Bicycles Bicycling is permitted on the park road to Chapin Mesa; use extreme caution due to sharp corners, narrow shoulders, and rocks and large vehicles on the road. Wetherill Mesa Road is closed to bicycles. The Long House Loop, a paved six-mile loop that begins at the Wetherill Mesa kiosk, is open to bicycles.

For Your Safety and Protection Visits to cliff dwellings can be strenuous. Trails are steep and uneven, with steps and ladders to climb. Visiting cliff dwellings or hiking is not recommended for those with heart or respiratory problems. Major cliff dwellings can be seen from overlooks. Parents: Watch carefully for your children's safety, especially near canyon rims and in archeological sites. Do not throw anything into the canyons; there may be people below. Emergency first aid is available; check with a ranger.

Park roads have sharp curves and steep grades. Be alert for falling rocks. Do not park on roadways; use pullouts. Roads and trails may be hazardous in winter; ask for details at the entrance station.

Never leave valuable items unattended and visible in your car. Take valuables with you if possible; lock large items in your trunk. Lock car doors and windows.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website. Overlooks are wheelchair-accessible with assistance. Wheelchairs with wide-rim wheels are recommended. Trails may not meet legal grade requirements.

Regulations Visitors to cliff dwellings must be accompanied by a park ranger during scheduled tours or open hours. • Camp only in the designated campground. • Feeding, capturing, or teasing

wildlife, and picking, cutting, or damaging plants are prohibited. • Pets must be physically restrained and 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 regulations are on the park website. • Motor vehicles are allowed only on roadways, pullouts, or parking areas. • Report all accidents or injuries to a park ranger.

Stewardship and Preservation Most cliff dwellings are unexcavated and closed to the public. The 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 in

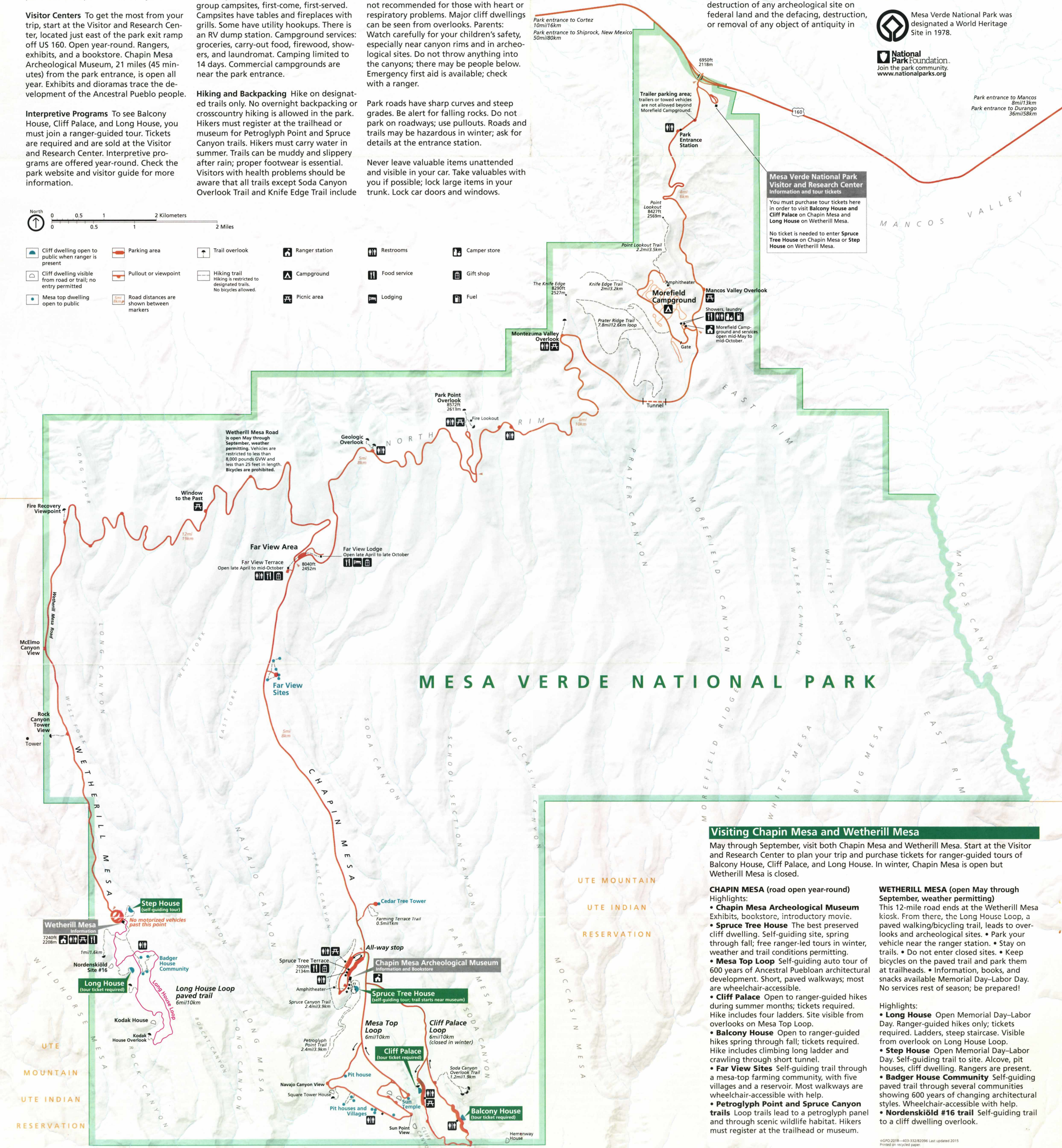
the park. Fines up to \$100,000 and imprisonment up to 20 years are possible. Sites in the park are fragile. Please help us protect them for future generations.

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

Mesa Verde National Park is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn more about national parks at www.nps.gov.

Mesa Verde National Park was designated a World Heritage Site in 1978.

National Park Foundation. Join the park community. www.nationalparks.org



Visiting Chapin Mesa and Wetherill Mesa

May through September, visit both Chapin Mesa and Wetherill Mesa. Start at the Visitor and Research Center to plan your trip and purchase tickets for ranger-guided tours of Balcony House, Cliff Palace, and Long House. In winter, Chapin Mesa is open but Wetherill Mesa is closed.

CHAPIN MESA (road open year-round) Highlights:

- **Chapin Mesa Archeological Museum** Exhibits, bookstore, introductory movie.
- **Spruce Tree House** The best preserved cliff dwelling. Self-guiding site, spring through fall; free ranger-led tours in winter, weather and trail conditions permitting.
- **Mesa Top Loop** Self-guiding auto tour of 600 years of Ancestral Puebloan architectural development. Short, paved walkways; most are wheelchair-accessible.
- **Cliff Palace** Open to ranger-guided hikes during summer months; tickets required. Hike includes four ladders. Site visible from overlooks on Mesa Top Loop.
- **Balcony House** Open to ranger-guided hikes spring through fall; tickets required. Hike includes climbing long ladder and crawling through short tunnel.
- **Far View Sites** Self-guiding trail through a mesa-top farming community, with five villages and a reservoir. Most walkways are wheelchair-accessible with help.
- **Petroglyph Point and Spruce Canyon trails** Loop trails lead to a petroglyph panel and through scenic wildlife habitat. Hikers must register at the trailhead or museum.

WETHERILL MESA (open May through September, weather permitting)

This 12-mile road ends at the Wetherill Mesa kiosk. From there, the Long House Loop, a paved walking/bicycling trail, leads to overlooks and archeological sites. • Park your vehicle near the ranger station. • Stay on trails. • Do not enter closed sites. • Keep bicycles on the paved trail and park them at trailheads. • Information, books, and snacks available Memorial Day–Labor Day. No services rest of season; be prepared!

- Highlights:
- **Long House** Open Memorial Day–Labor Day. Ranger-guided hikes only; tickets required. Ladders, steep staircase. Visible from overlook on Long House Loop.
 - **Step House** Open Memorial Day–Labor Day. Self-guiding trail to site. Alcove, pit houses, cliff dwelling. Rangers are present.
 - **Badger House Community** Self-guiding paved trail through several communities showing 600 years of changing architectural styles. Wheelchair-accessible with help.
 - **Nordenskiöld #16 trail** Self-guiding trail to a cliff dwelling overlook.