



MONTEZUMA CASTLE National Monument

Camp Verde, Arizona

Trail to Montezuma Castle

As you begin your walk, please remember that here at "The Castle" *fragility* is the condition and *preservation* is the rule.

Damage to extremely fragile ancient walls and other architectural features began growing at an alarming rate when visitors first started coming to Montezuma Castle in the 1930s. The cliff-dwelling had to be closed to the public in 1951.

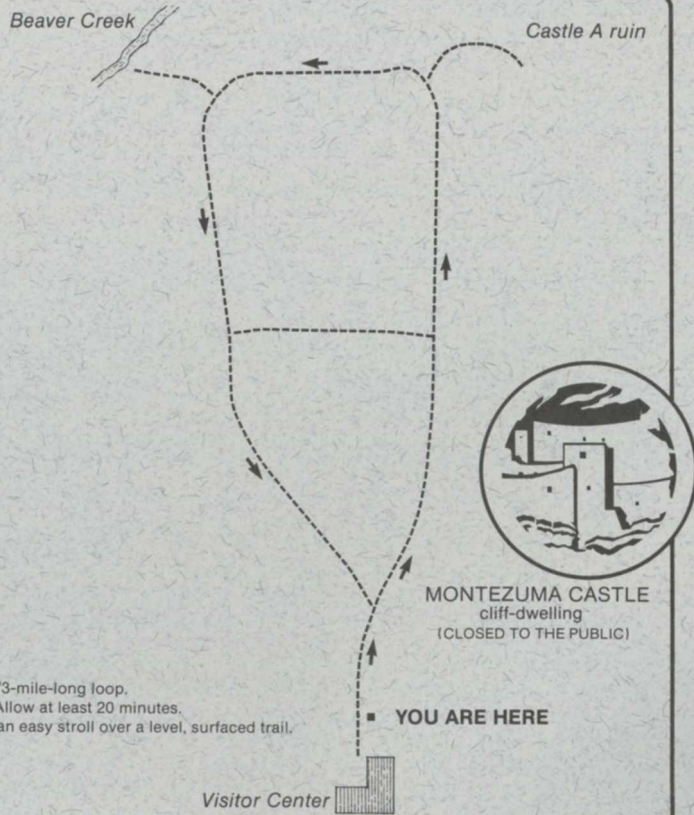
You are one of thousands of people who come here every year. Please do your part to help prevent further deterioration by allowing preservation to be your guide as you walk the trail to Montezuma Castle today.

Trail Facts

How long? It's a 1/3-mile-long loop.

How much time? Allow at least 20 minutes.

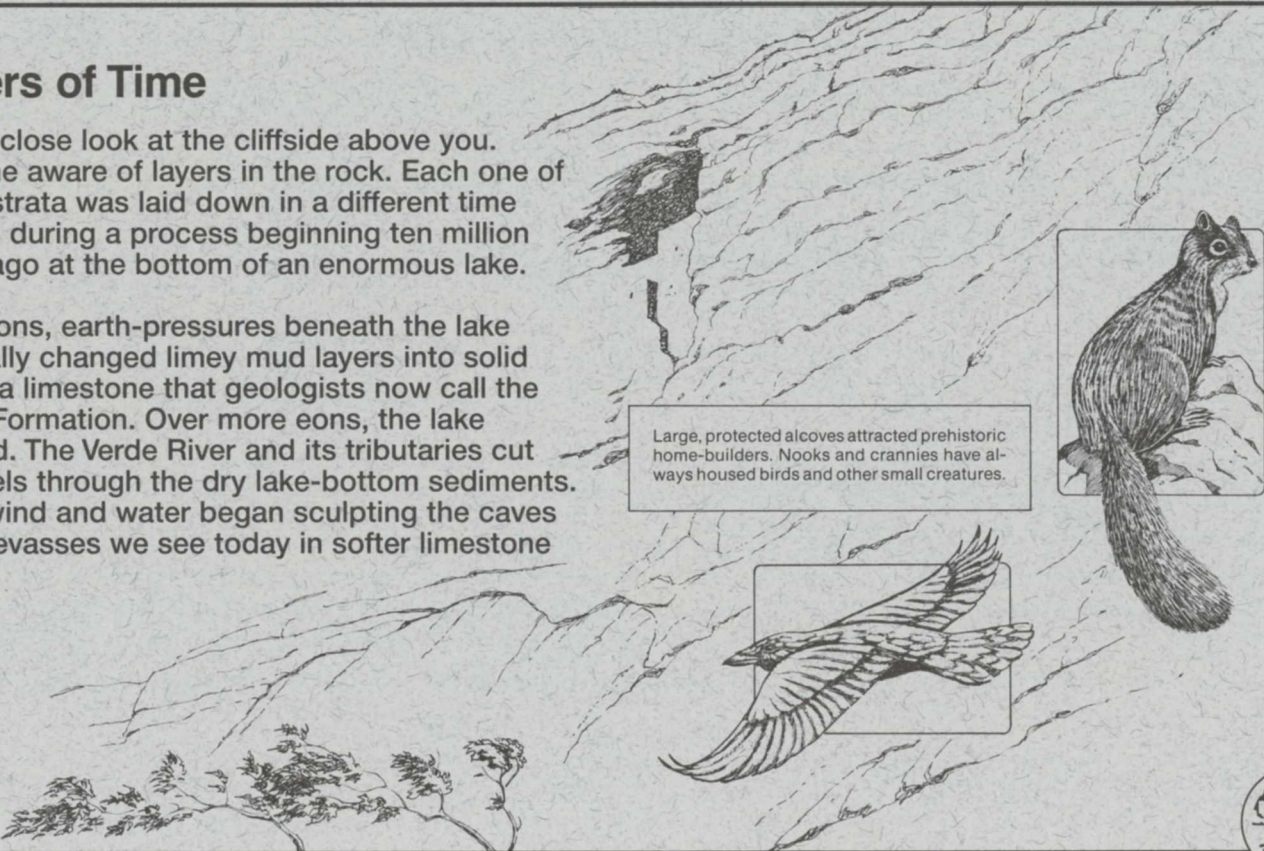
How difficult? It's an easy stroll over a level, surfaced trail.



Layers of Time

Take a close look at the cliffside above you. Become aware of layers in the rock. Each one of these strata was laid down in a different time period, during a process beginning ten million years ago at the bottom of an enormous lake.

Over eons, earth-pressures beneath the lake gradually changed limey mud layers into solid rock—a limestone that geologists now call the Verde Formation. Over more eons, the lake drained. The Verde River and its tributaries cut channels through the dry lake-bottom sediments. Then wind and water began sculpting the caves and crevasses we see today in softer limestone layers.



Large, protected alcoves attracted prehistoric home-builders. Nooks and crannies have always housed birds and other small creatures.

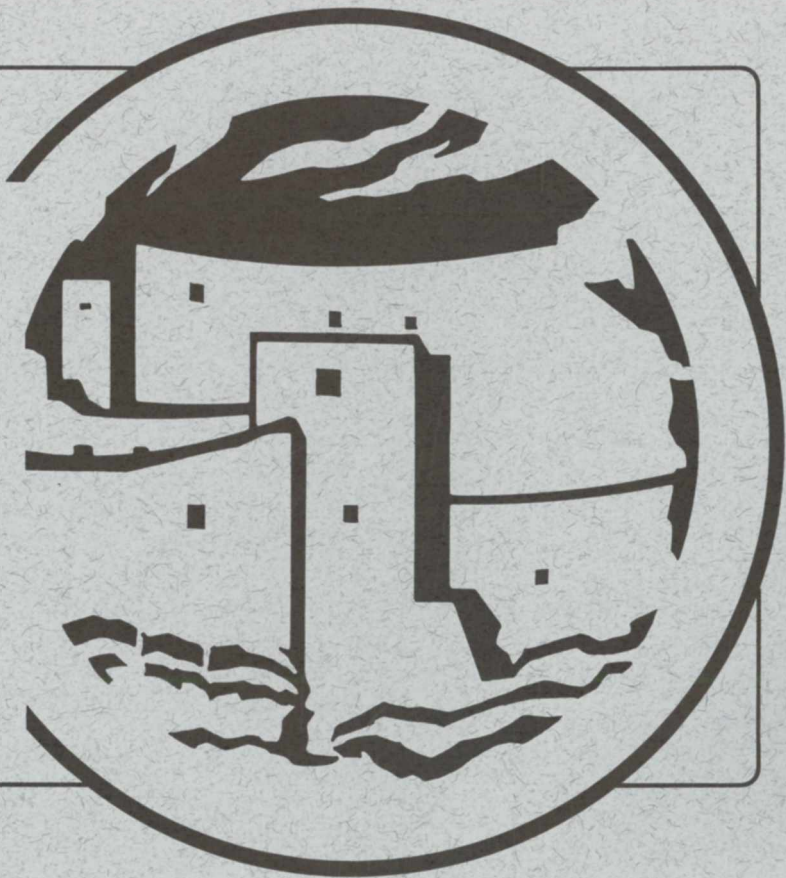


Welcome to The Castle

Pause a few moments to enjoy this view of Montezuma Castle. Don't you suppose it must have stopped the settlers and soldiers who first saw the cliff-dwelling over a century ago?

The odd name came from a mistaken belief that the cliff-dwelling was a castle Aztec refugees had built for their emperor. We know now that Montezuma never strayed this far north from his home in Mexico, but the name has stuck.

Why did a community of prehistoric farmers choose this particular alcove high in the north wall of Beaver Creek for their home? For protection from the elements? The benefits of day-long solar heat afforded by its southern exposure? Defensibility against intruders? Tradition? The view? Or perhaps a combination of these theories?



The Community

A farming community of perhaps 200 people prospered here for more than three centuries. The Castle was home to 35 or so of these people. Archeologists suggest they may have fled what is today the Flagstaff area due to overpopulation around A.D. 1100. Their name, "Sinagua," is a variation of the Spanish "sin agua," which means "without water."

The excavation of mounds of broken pottery, worn-out tools, animal bones, and other trash at the base of the cliff has enabled archeologists to reconstruct some of the Sinagua's rich lifeways—all reflections of their intimate relationship with the land.

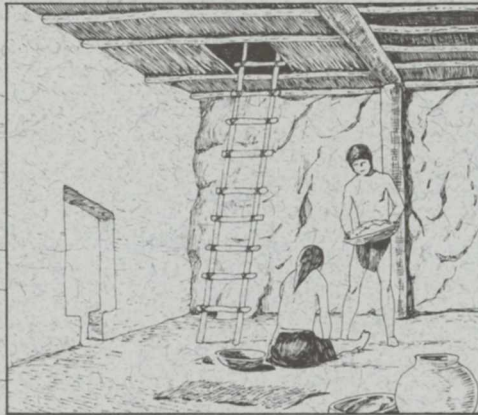


Sinagua objects of utility and beauty, crafted from natural materials.

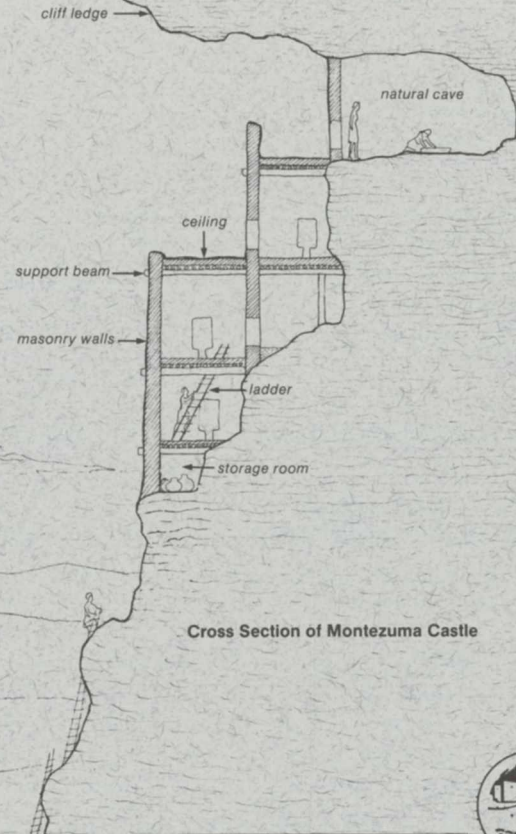


The Way Up

How in the world do you build a structure large enough to house 35 people high up on a steep canyon wall? Sound impossible? Here's how Montezuma Castle's ingenious Sinagua farmers managed it.



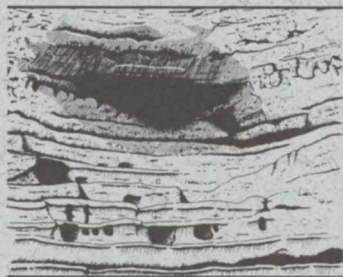
Typical room interior.



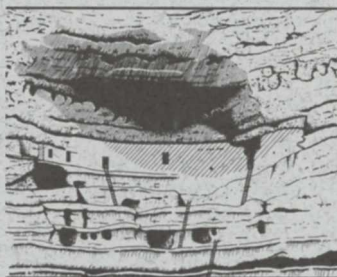
Cross Section of Montezuma Castle



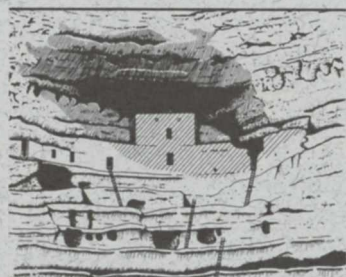
Construction Sequence



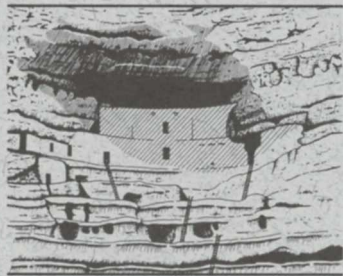
1 Limestone ledges and caves before the castle was built.



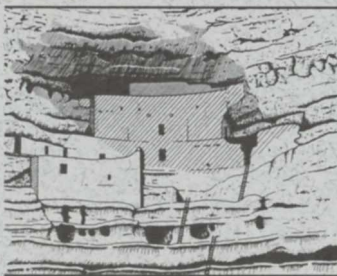
2 First construction: a six-room unit (3rd floor).



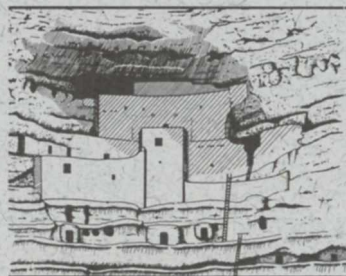
3 Small room added at west (left) end; one room built on next (4th) floor.



4 Fourth floor expanded. Two rooms built in small cave (2nd floor).



5 Parapet and two rooms built at top (5th floor); three small rooms at front (1st, 2nd floors).

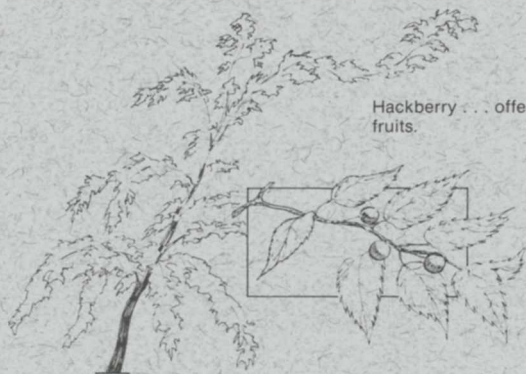


6 Three stacked rooms formed the central "tower" (1st, 2nd, 3rd floors). Small storage rooms may have been built earlier.

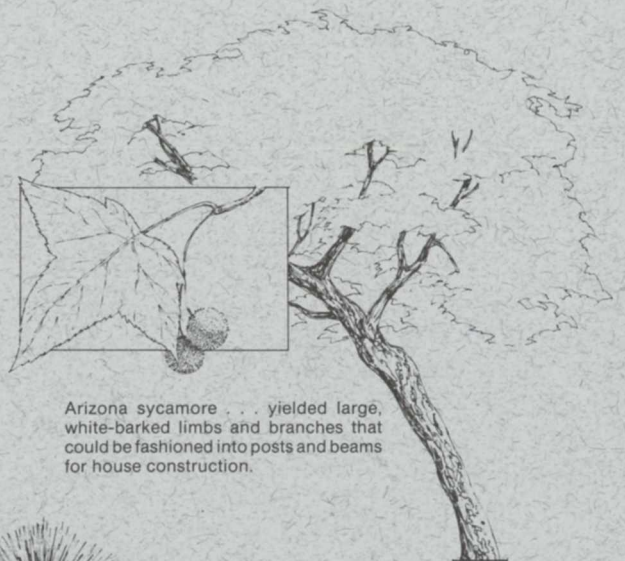


Prehistoric Produce

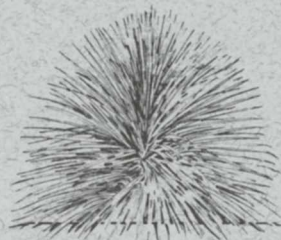
For Montezuma Castle's Sinagua residents, there was no dropping by the market to pick up a last-minute staple or two. If plants were needed, the Sinagua either had to grow them or find them already growing. An ancient tradition of living off the land taught them how, when, and where. Look for markers along the trail that identify some of the plants the Sinagua used.



Hackberry . . . offered small, succulent fruits.



Arizona sycamore . . . yielded large, white-barked limbs and branches that could be fashioned into posts and beams for house construction.



Yucca . . . provided fibers that could be woven into baskets, sandals, and mats.

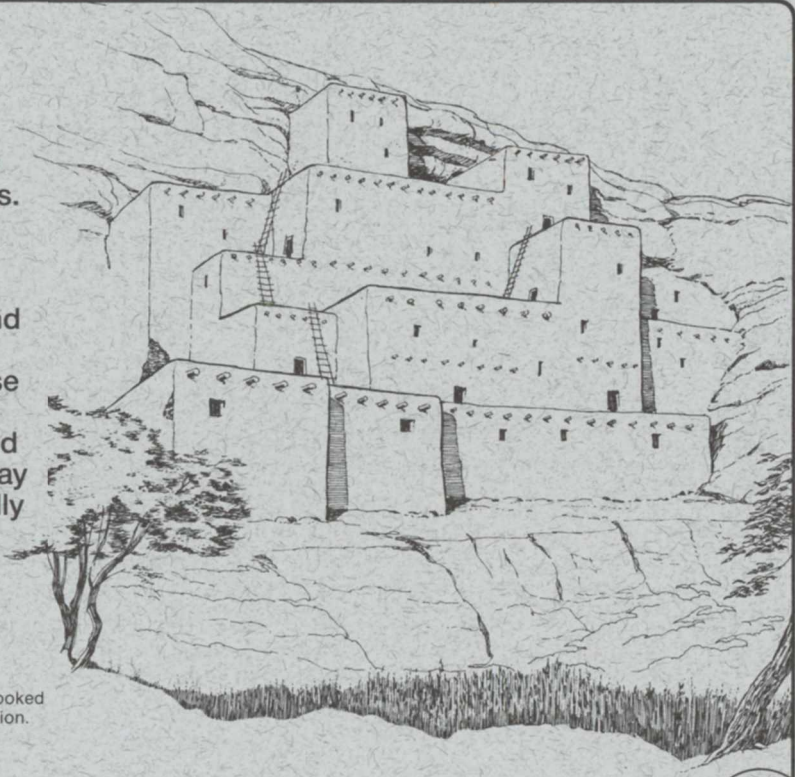


The People Next Door

Here's another "castle"—this one called "A" by the archeologists who excavated it in the 1930s.

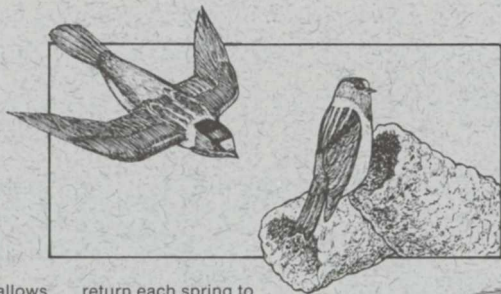
Like neighboring Montezuma Castle, Castle A was occupied by Sinagua farmers between A.D. 1200 and 1450. However, with 45 rooms and an estimated occupancy of 100, it was much larger. It's not nearly as well preserved, because sometime before the Sinaguas' mysterious disappearance in the late 1400s a fire destroyed almost all interior features. All you can see today are parts of a few collapsed walls and a partially reconstructed foundation.

Prehistorically, Castle A may have looked something like this artist's reconstruction.



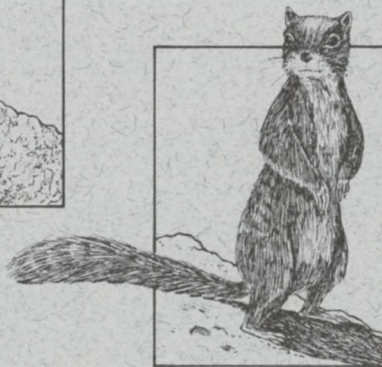
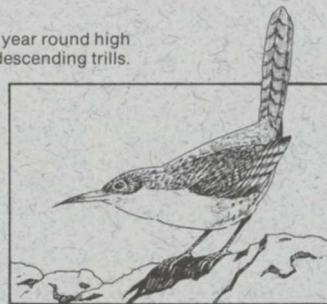
The High Life

Ancient Sinagua farmers weren't the only creatures to seek out the ledges and caves in these limestone cliffs for homes. Watch for the movements—and listen for the sounds—of a surprising variety of cliffside animal neighbors.



Cliffside swallows . . . return each spring to raise their young in mud nests stuck to cliff overhangs. Watch their acrobatic swoopings as they search out meals of insects.

Canyon wrens . . . spend all year round high in the cliffs. Listen for their descending trills.



Rock squirrels . . . play and sun themselves on even the most precarious ledges.



Lifeline

Beaver Creek has always been a major focus of life in the Verde Valley. Prehistoric Sinagua farmers constructed Montezuma Castle and other structures near the creek. They dug ditches to carry creek water to irrigate the fields of corn, beans, squash, and cotton they cultivated on flat patches of creek-bottom land. They also hunted animals attracted by the creek, and gathered creekside plants.

Ever-sensitive to the moods of Beaver Creek—because their lives literally depended on it—the Sinagua watched their lifeline change with the seasons. Sometimes—seemingly in the blink of an eye—the gentle, clear meander grew into a raging, muddy torrent, leaving debris stranded high in creekside trees.

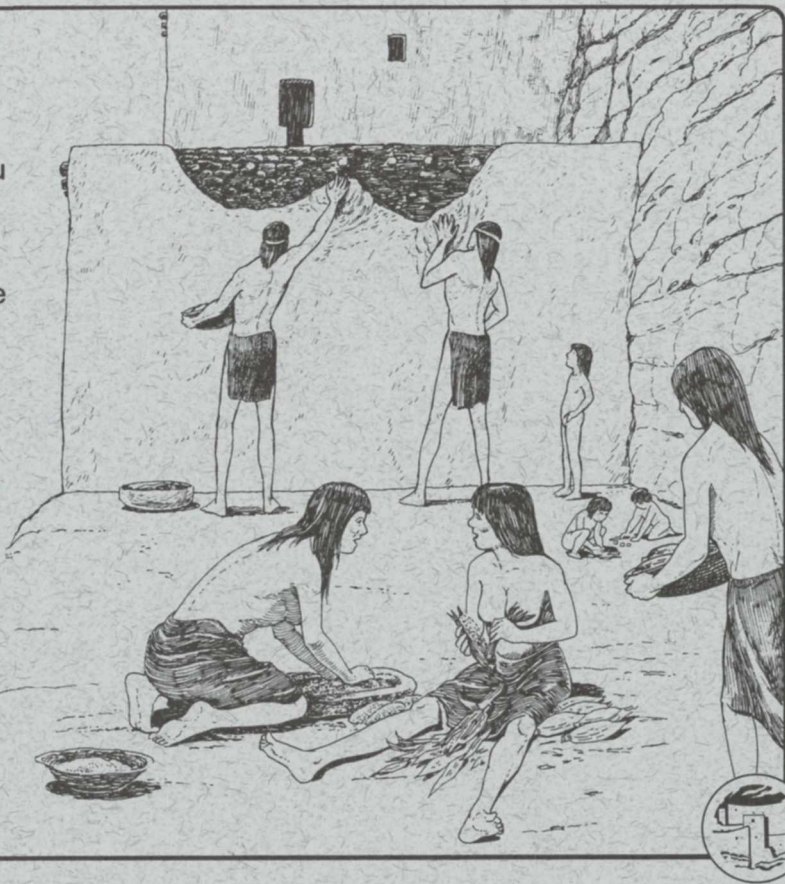


The Neighborhood

You can see Montezuma Castle and Castle A from here. If you look closely at the cliffside, you might spot other ledges and caves used by the Sinagua.

The Sinagua people who made their homes here may have been a closely-knit community of families and friends. Even though the trappings of civilization change over time, people's social needs don't. Take a moment to imagine busy villagers doing their daily chores, perhaps chatting about the weather, crops, an upcoming hunt, or a recent death in the community.

Mysteriously, the neighborhood began to break up sometime around A.D. 1400. Within 50 years, Montezuma Castle was completely deserted.

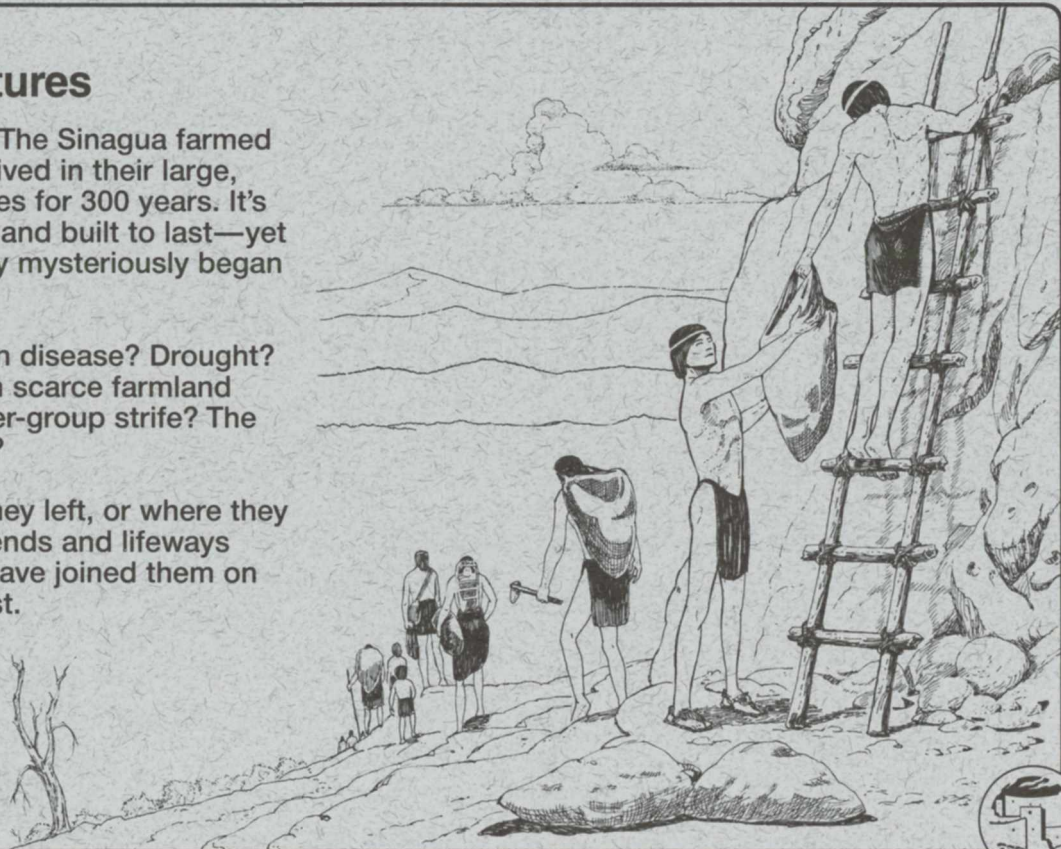


Mysterious Departures

Life must have been good. The Sinagua farmed beside Beaver Creek, and lived in their large, carefully constructed villages for 300 years. It's obvious they came to stay, and built to last—yet sometime in the 1400s, they mysteriously began to leave.

Could the reason have been disease? Drought? Overpopulation, resulting in scarce farmland and game? Invasion, or inter-group strife? The breakup of trade networks?

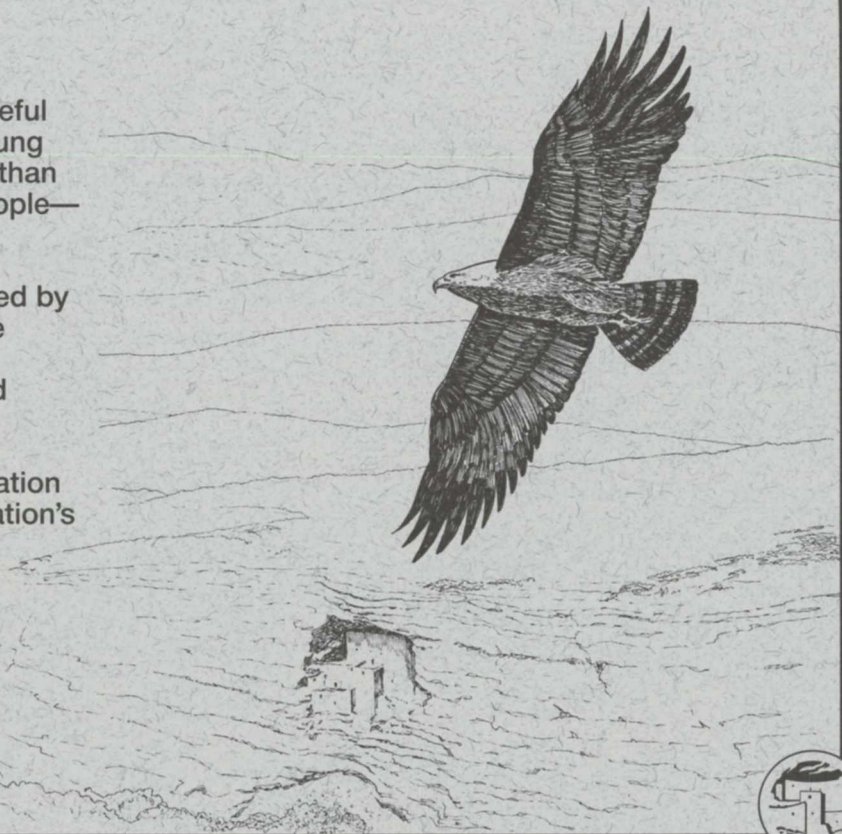
No one really knows why they left, or where they went—but Hopi Indian legends and lifeways suggest the Sinagua may have joined them on their mesas to the northeast.



Windows in the Past

Cliffside home to three centuries of resourceful Sinagua farmers, Montezuma Castle has clung tenaciously to its limestone ledge for more than 800 years. But, over time, weather—and people—have taken their toll.

We can't control the ongoing damage caused by weather, but with your help we can stop the clock on the wear and tear people bring. Remember that fragility is the condition and preservation is the rule here at Montezuma Castle and at ruins scattered all over the American Southwest. Only through preservation can we reveal fascinating aspects of our Nation's ancient past, and learn from them.

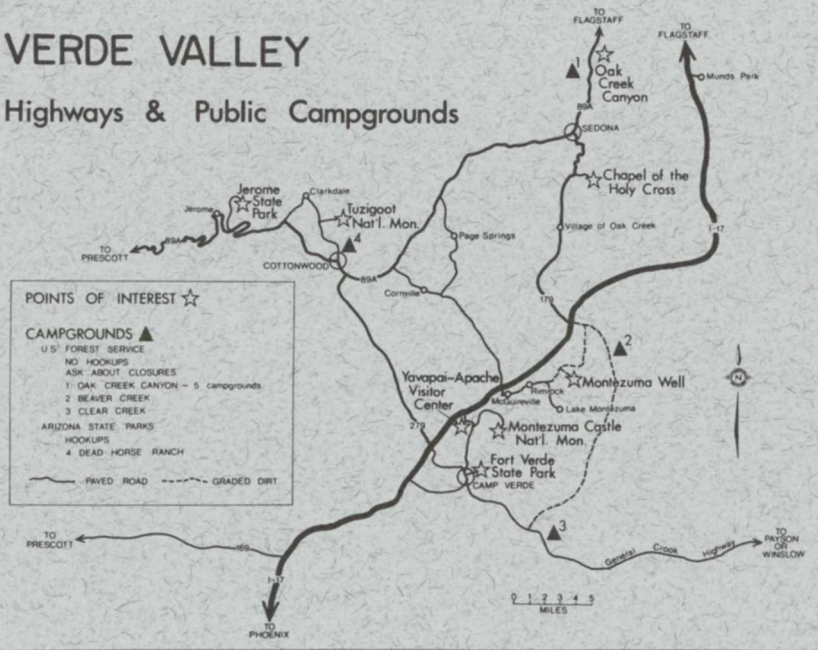


FOR YOUR SAFETY

Please stay on established trails—be alert for snakes—
avoid overexposure to the sun and heat.

VERDE VALLEY

Highways & Public Campgrounds



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