

# Chaco Culture

National Historical Park  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior

## Una Vida Trail Guide

1-mile roundtrip (including petroglyphs).  
Portions are rocky, steep, and slippery when wet.  
Take water.

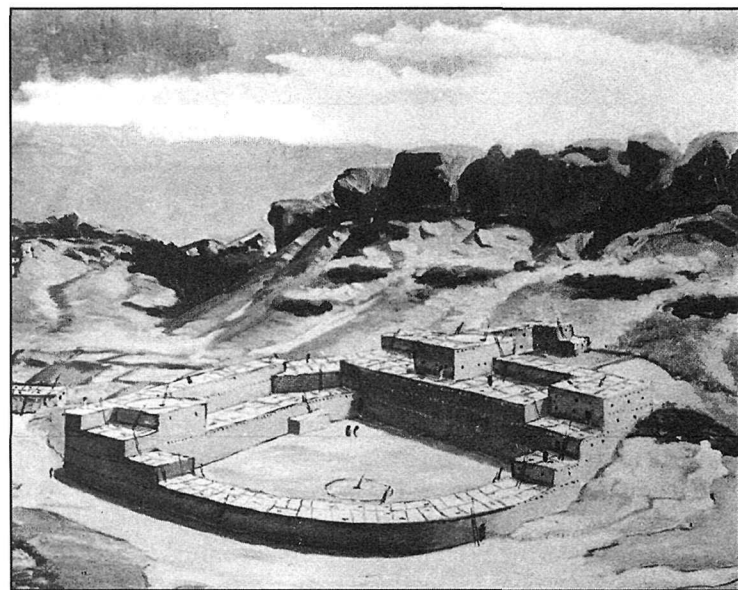
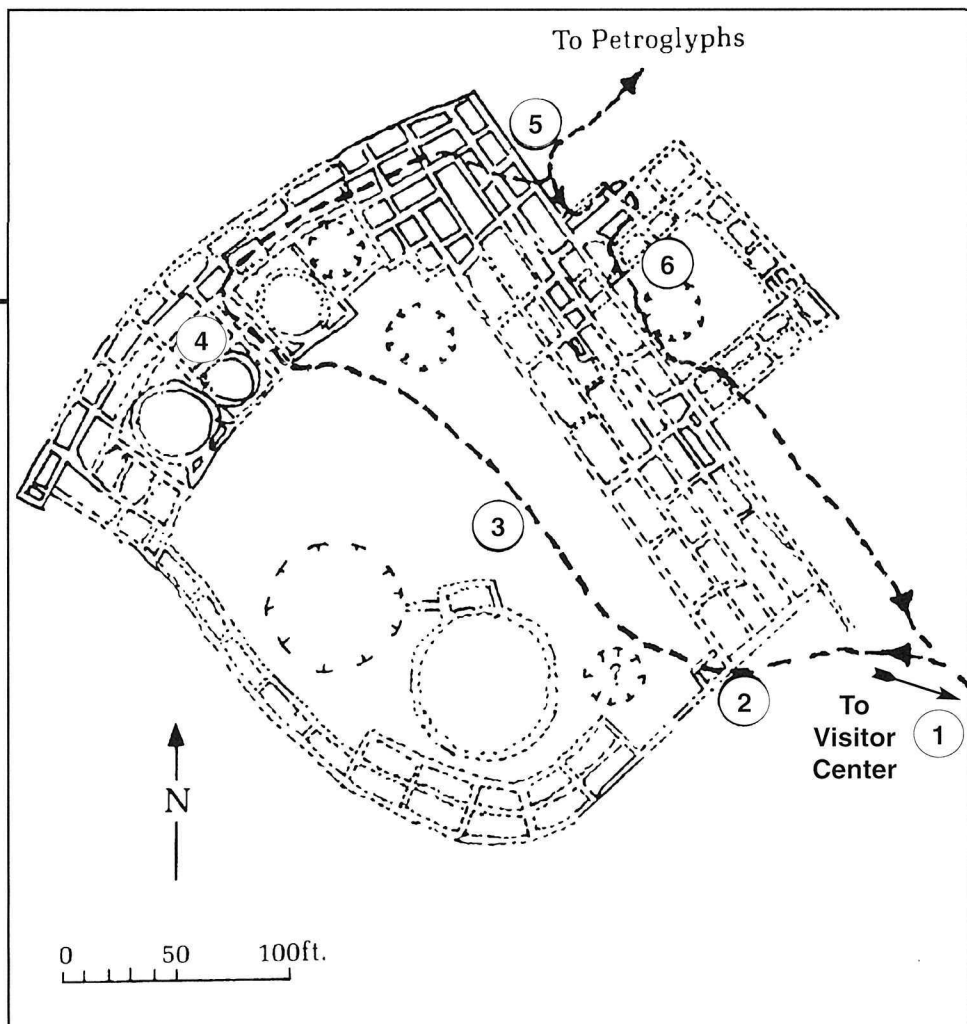
### Una Vida

Named “Una Vida” (Spanish for “One Life”) by Lt. James Simpson and his Mexican guide Carravahal during a military expedition into Navajo land in 1849. Pueblo, Hopi, and Navajo place names also exist.

Una Vida exists today in a near-natural state of preservation, free from major vandalism, and with only minor excavations and preservation repairs. Time and the forces of nature have collapsed the roofs. Walls have fallen. Centuries of blowing sand have covered the rooms with a protective blanket of sand and native vegetation. The architecture appears much the same as it has for the last thousand years.

When you visit Chacoan sites, please remember that the Hopi, the Pueblos of New Mexico, and the Navajo consider these places to be their sacred homeland. Descendants continue to return to the sites on pilgrimages. Enter these places with respect.

Cultural sites require special care when we visit them. The walls are very fragile and subject to many forces of erosion. Wind, rain, snow, and foot traffic from nearly 100,000 visitors annually impacts this site. Please help to protect this important cultural area by walking only on designated trails and by not climbing on walls. Do not write on the rocks. Do not deposit items in the sites. Do not collect pottery sherds, artifacts, plants, or rocks.



MNM115.79. Reconstruction drawing by Coffin of Una Vida.  
Laboratory of Anthropology, Santa Fe

### Stop 1. The Chacoan Great House

Una Vida is a Chacoan “great house,” a large pre-planned multi-storied public building with distinctive masonry, formal earthen architecture, and a great kiva. There are over 150 great houses throughout the San Juan Basin. Chaco was the heart of this elaborate system and functioned as a political, trading, and ceremonial center for over 300 years.

Una Vida was purposely located atop a natural rise in the landscape, a common great house feature. This practice may have made these impressive public buildings look even more imposing to the people.

The construction of this Chacoan great house was begun about 850 and saw continuous building episodes for over 250 years, concurrent with those at Pueblo Bonito and Peñasco Blanco. All three sites are precisely positioned along an 8-mile long line-of-site axis and were connected by Chacoan roads and communications features. Una Vida is the easternmost of these Chaco Canyon great houses. Chacoan roads converged on Una Vida from the east, southeast, and south. Una Vida was linked to the surrounding Fajada Gap communities.

### Stop 2. The Historic Reuse of Una Vida

As you tour Una Vida, you’ll notice several different styles of the masonry. Historic dry-laid (without mortar) masonry walls were incorporated into some of the older Chacoan walls. Surveys identified these structures as Navajo in origin: several hogans (traditional Navajo homes), an oven, and a sheep corral dating from the 1800s.

Navajo oral history indicates that a Hispanic shepherd from Colorado did some of the construction when working for a large sheep herding operation based in Chama, New Mexico. In the early 1900s, large herds of sheep were regularly moved to winter grazing areas in Chaco Canyon. This site would have provided an abundant supply of building stone for a sheep camp and some standing walls. The once lush grasslands would have supported large herds of sheep.

### Stop 3. The Site Plan

Standing in the plaza of Una Vida, the general outline of this building can be seen. The “L” shaped, 2 to 3 story building opened to the Southeast. Receding rooftops created a terraced effect. Single story rooms fronted the plaza and stepped up to a second story along the back wall. A few roomblocks at the southwest corner rose to a third story. A curving wall composed of 30 to 40 connected single-story rooms joined the ends of the “L”.

Embraced inside the “L” shape and the enclosing wall is the large plaza where you now stand. This enclosed plaza

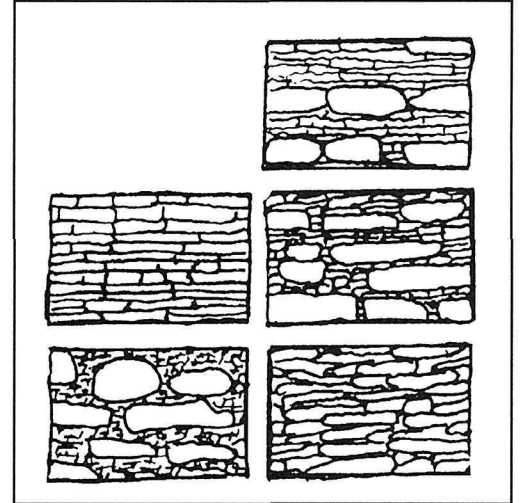
is characteristic of Chacoan great houses, although each configuration is unique. Plazas are important areas in modern pueblos where sacred public ceremonies are performed and where many other activities occur.

Looking towards Fajada Butte, the depression directly in front of the Stop 3 marker is a great kiva. Great kivas are another characteristic element of Chacoan great house construction. The size and complexity of these structures indicates that they were used for large gatherings and ceremonies. In modern Puebloan cultures, kivas are buildings used for religious worship, similar to churches, mosques, and synagogues.

### Stop 4. Chaco Construction

Chacoan masonry styles subtly changed through time. These differences allow archaeologists to relate the construction periods at Una Vida to other great houses in the canyon and throughout the Chacoan world.

The well-engineered walls are typical of Chacoan construction; broad at the base and narrowing as they get higher to evenly distribute the weight from 3 or 4 story tall walls. This indicates a high degree of pre-planning in the construction of Chacoan great houses. Large blocks of rooms were added during several building episodes over a 250-year period. Each construction phase continued to adhere to the great house plan. After the building was erected, the intricately crafted masonry was covered over with a coat of plaster to give the great house a very different look from the one you see today.



### Stop 5. Petroglyphs

A short walk up the slope will take you to a petroglyph panel. The sandstone walls of Chaco Canyon were an important place for the people to record images and symbols.

Petroglyphs are pecked, incised, and abraded into the desert varnish (dark patina) on the rock surface to create designs. Pictographs are images painted onto the rock. Both types of imagery occur near the great houses, at isolated panels, at shrines, and at sites that marked astronomical observations.

Pueblo and Hopi descendants often recognize the images as meaningful symbols. Some petroglyphs represent clan symbols. These clan symbols can affirm ancient and ongoing associations to the sites and mark the paths of their clan’s sacred migrations.



### Stop 6. The Future

Una Vida will not be excavated in the foreseeable future for several reasons. Leaving sites in their natural states of preservation covered with blown sand and native vegetation is the best means of preserving the site. Removing the sand and clearing the rooms exposes the walls to rain, freeze-thaw cycles, and hastens their destruction. It also creates a difficult, costly, and ongoing maintenance problem to preserve the exposed walls. An important concern is the belief of many Pueblo and Hopi Indians and others that these sites should be left to naturally return to the earth without being disturbed.

Today archaeology has shifted away from large-scale excavations. Techniques now allow much information to be gathered without ever disturbing a site. Sites are mapped and surveyed, and sampled for tree ring dating studies. Pottery sherds are studied and dated. Remote sensing provides data without digging into the site. Museum collections are re-examined, and new ideas emerge from the existing data that has been collected over the last 100

years. Oral history traditions of Pueblo and Hopi Indian descendants provide complimentary insights and understanding of these sites.

Returning to the visitor center, pause and look out over the canyon. The landscape has changed little since the Chacoans occupied this area and vast areas of the Southwest. The remains of the great houses and Chacoan features today blend into the landscape. These sites remind us that this was the center of Chacoan culture for over 300 years. Why did they choose this area? What forces unified the Chacoan world? Why did the people change from the Chacoan ways? These questions may never be answered, but the cultural remains will continue to be places that inspire us with the Chacoan contributions to architecture, astronomy, art, and agriculture. Una Vida is one important link to the history of the Southwestern Indian peoples that is preserved at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. The park was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982 and joined a select list of protected areas “whose outstanding natural and cultural resources form the common inheritance of all mankind.”