They clustered their pit houses to form small villages and many of their personal possessions—kivas—of later times. At first these people lived behind. Today these relics are preserved in Mesa Verde National Park, which occupies part of a large plateau rising high above Montezuma and Mancos Valleys. Archeologists who studied the relics have named the earliest people to live at Mesa Verde Basket Makers in recognition of their impressive skill in that craft. They also made pottery, but at this stage in their history, the pottery lacked the quality of their baskets. At first these people lived in pithouses, dwellings dug into the ground so that the walls of the pit were the walls of the house. They clustered their pit houses to form small villages, usually on the mesa top, but occasionally in the caves of the cliffs. Crops of beans, corn, and squash were grown in the rich, red, well-drained soil of the mesa tops. Dogs and turkeys were kept, and turkeys seem to have been raised more for their feathers, which were used in baskets for the cold winter months, than for food.

For many years the Basket Makers prospered on the mesa. By the middle of the eighth century their civilization was reaching its height as Pueblo Indians, but had begun building houses above ground. They set poles upright in the ground to form the outline of a wall and then wove the poles together to form the walls of the house. They made the roof the same way and added a thick coating of mud to weatherproof both walls and roof. The houses were built one another in a long, curving row. Frequently, they built one or two deep pit houses in front of the crescent-shaped rows. Perhaps these were the beginnings of the underground religious rooms—kivas—as they were later called. Before the year 1000, stone masonry began to replace the pole-and-mud construction. Sturdy, compact apartment-like buildings were built, and by the 12th century, they were exceptionally well made. Some stood as high as three stories and contained more than 50 rooms. Often the rooms were built around courtyards that contained several kivas. Near the end of the 12th century something caused the Mesa Verde people to make another great change in their lives, for they began to abandon their houses on the mesa tops and move down into the caves in the cliff. There they built their cliff dwellings we find today. Why did they make this drastic change? Perhaps it had been uncomfortable places to live—hot in summer, cold in winter. Living in the caves required a difficult climb up and down the cliffs to reach the courtyards, and it must also have been hazardous for the children and old people. One guess is this was a time of warfare—either with local Indians fighting among themselves or with a foreign enemy tribe—and the caves were sought out for defensive purposes.

At any rate this period of living in cliff dwellings lasted less than 100 years and before the close of the 13th century the cliff dwellers left Mesa Verde forever. What caused the abandonment remains a mystery. Perhaps the people tired of strife. Perhaps they left because of drought. We know that the 13th century, particularly the last half, was a time of repeated drought and succeesive crop failure. We think that when the cliff dwellers left they traveled to the south and southwest—down to the valley of the Rio Grande and its tributaries. They may have joined existing villages of Pueblo Indians, or they may have established villages of their own. Perhaps both. Whatever happened, it seems likely that some of the Pueblo Indians in central New Mexico are at least partly descended from the cliff dwellers. After the Indians left, the cliff dwellings lay silent for centuries. The Spaniards came into the area in the mid-18th century but did not find the ruins. The name Mesa Verde, which means “green table,” surely dates from the time of their explorations. Not until 1874 was Two-Story Cliff House discovered. But it was still 14 years before the many canyons of the mesa began to be explored. In 1906 the area became a national park and the period of scientific excavation began.
Wetherill Mesa
Private vehicles are prohibited on the Wetherill Mesa Road. The area is open only during the summer with access by bus. The bus service starts adjacent to the Far View Visitor Center parking lot. Sandwiches and cold drinks are available at a snack stand on Wetherill Mesa. The 19-kilometer (12-mile) bus ride offers excellent views of the surrounding area. The ruins sites are reached by mini-bus and trail. Long House and Step House ruins are open to the public. Park rangers are on duty to answer questions about the ruins. Other ruins may be open to the public in the future. Please check the schedule at the visitor center.

Chapin Mesa
Headquarters for the park and the office of the superintendent are at Chapin Mesa. The U.S. Post Office there operates all year. The archeological museum contains displays of artifacts found in the Indian ruins of Mesa Verde. Dioramas and exhibits explain the life-style of the people who lived here centuries ago. The Spruce Tree Terrace, open from early spring through fall, provides light food service, groceries, Indian handicrafts, and souvenirs. During peak season there is a silversmith demonstration. Bicycles can be rented at this store.

Visitor Services and Facilities

Elevations on the map below are all in feet. Those on the park map are in metric and customary measurements.