

Aztec Ruins

National Monument
New Mexico

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



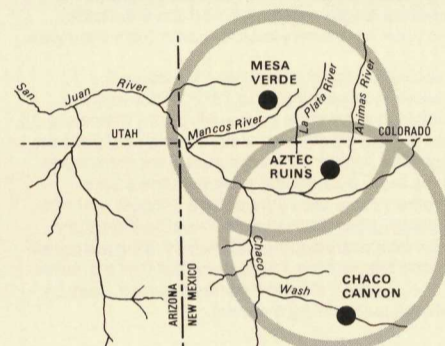
Aztec Stood Midway Between Two Centers Of Anasazi Culture.

Sixty-five miles south lay Chaco, a sprawling community of large pueblos that flourished between AD 1050 and 1150. The first settlers here, if not actually Chacoans, were strongly influenced by their ideas in such matters as architecture, ceramics, and ceremonies. They built the original pueblo and

lived in it for half a century or more before moving away.

A few decades later another people settled here. Also Anasazi, they were culturally akin to the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde (flourished 1200 to 1275), who lived in the rugged mesa country forty miles northwest. This

second group remodeled the old pueblo and built others nearby, using techniques characteristic of Mesa Verde. Like their predecessors, they too prospered only a few generations. Half a century or so after their coming, these Anasazi deserted the town, leaving it to slowly crumble in the wind and the rain.



An Anasazi Town

It is the river that makes this land hospitable. Rising in the San Juan Mountains to the north, the Animas flows year round across the plains of northwestern New Mexico. Near Aztec it runs through a slender valley lush with cottonwoods and willows. Farmers have long made a good living raising crops in the valley's fertile bottom lands.

Some of the earliest farmers were Anasazi, an ancient people of the Colorado Plateau who became skillful at community architecture in the course of their social development. Long before they began living on this site, scores of their stone pueblos, large and small, were scattered up and down the river. Sometime in the early 1100s, a group settled at Aztec and constructed a large, multistory pueblo (the West Ruin) on rising ground overlooking the river. Tree-ring dates indicate that this structure went up between AD 1106 and 1124 and that most of the work was carried out between 1111 and 1115. After 1115 only an occasional room was added, perhaps for new couples as the population grew. This pueblo resembled the great houses built at Chaco half a century earlier. It was a huge E-shaped compound with hundreds of rooms on three levels and more than two dozen kivas, including a great kiva in the plaza, used apparently for community-wide ceremonies. The masonry work followed closely the Chacoan practice of alternating courses of large rectangular sandstone blocks with bands of smaller stones in an attractive pattern.

At the peak of the Chacoan period several hundred persons lived here, and we can imagine the pueblo buzzing with activity on a bright summer day. The women were grinding corn on the roof tops, making baskets and pots, minding the young, plastering walls and repairing them. Along the river some of the men tended crops, while others hunted deer or antelope or small game like rabbit and squirrel. At night the pueblo lay dark and quiet, lit only by small fires flickering here and there.

This village was a fairly prosperous place for many decades. Then about 1175 or 1200 these people abandoned the pueblo. We don't know whether it was all at once or gradually. Perhaps, like their kinsmen at Chaco, they were fleeing drought or other region-wide misfortunes. There is no evidence that they were driven away.

For several decades the old pueblo lay deserted. Then about 1225 the town sprang back to life. People of the Mesa Verde culture arrived and took up residence. They remodeled the pueblo and built new dwellings, the East Ruin. They introduced T-shaped doorways and variations in kiva styles. The newcomers carried on Mesa Verde ways in pottery, beadwork, and textiles and traded their wares over a wide area. Like their predecessors a century before, these people also flourished for a time. But once again bad times returned. The population dwindled, the arts decayed. The last years were, declared the archeologist Earl Morris, "a time of cultural

senility or disease." After 50 years or so this second group likewise abandoned Aztec. A fire burned out the eastern half of the main pueblo. Whether the Mesa Verdeans set the fire themselves or whether it was burned by an enemy is not clear.

The exodus of the Mesa Verdeans came in the latter 1200s, a time of population shifts throughout the region. Perhaps they joined their kindred fleeing drought or other calamities and made their way southeast to the better-watered Rio Grande country or west to the mesas along the present Arizona-New Mexico border. Whatever their fate, the pueblos they left behind gradually crumbled over the centuries into ruin.

THE POTTERY SEQUENCE

Pottery supplied the first hint of the two distinctive occupations at Aztec. The lowest level of excavation yielded Chacoan ware. Vessels 1 (a bowl with lug handles) and 2 (a pitcher with the effigy of a frog) below are representative pieces made by the first builders of Aztec. This pottery is characterized by hatched designs, often fluently drawn, and tapered rims. The paint is mineral. The other

items, found in a level above the Chacoan and therefore later, are Mesa Verdean in style, made by the people who remodeled Aztec in the 13th century. Pottery of this type can be identified by their solid designs drawn in vegetable paint, square rims, and comparatively thick walls. The mug 3 and the bowl 4 are good examples of the potter's craft as practiced by the Mesa Verde Anasazi.



Items shown are not to scale

Aztec Ruins

About Your Visit
The park is northwest of the city of Aztec, near the junction of U.S. 550 and NM 44. The hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, longer during summer. The park is closed December 25 and January 1.

Administration
Aztec Ruins National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O. Box 640, Aztec, NM 87410, is in charge.



This T-shaped doorway in the West Ruin is Mesa Verdean in origin; the far wall is Chacoan in construction.



Two bands of green sandstone—at ground level and waist high—run along a wall of the West Ruin.



The Great Kiva was a sanctuary of sorts, a place for the villagers to meet for community-wide purposes.

Excavating the Ruins

Contrary to the name, these ruins had nothing to do with the Aztecs of central Mexico. The Aztecs in fact lived centuries after the rise and fall of this Anasazi town. Inspired by popular histories about Cortés's conquest of Mexico and thinking that the Aztecs built the pueblos, the early Anglo settlers named the site Aztec. The town eventually took its name from the ruins.

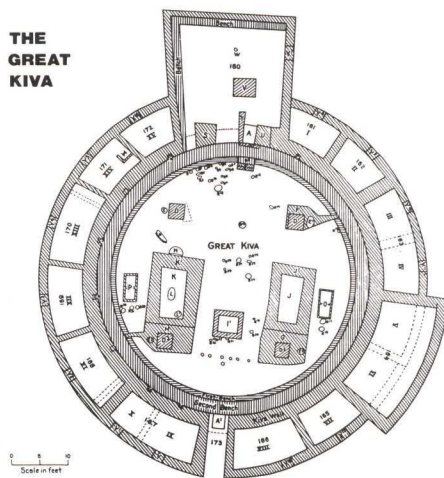
The first visitor of record was Dr. John S. Newberry, a geologist, in 1859. He found the pueblo in a fair state of preservation, with walls 25 feet high in places and many rooms undisturbed. From the rubble scattered about, he concluded that a large population had once lived here. Newberry saw the ruins before vandals and pot-hunters got to them over the next half century. When the anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan investigated the ruins in 1878, he noted that a quarter of the pueblo's stones had been carted away by settlers for building material.

A few years later a local youth saw things his more experienced predecessors had missed. Breaking through a wall, Sherman S. Howe and his companions found themselves in a room with 13 burials and an eye-catching trove of baskets, beads and ornaments, cotton cloth, feather cloaks, sandals, pots, stone axes, knives, and jar rests. This and much other important material

soon vanished in a wave of pothunting that stripped the ruin of its most accessible antiquities. Not until 1889, when the site passed into private ownership, did the pueblo become relatively safe against looting. In 1916 the ruin came under the protection of the American Museum of Natural History. Seven years later it was declared a national monument.

Earl H. Morris's archeological work at Aztec will be remembered as long as there is interest in the prehistoric Southwest. He was 25 when he headed up the first systematic dig at Aztec in 1916. He spent the next five seasons excavating and stabilizing the West Ruin and plaza and a few rooms in the East Ruin. He made many finds—among them a rare example of prehistoric Pueblo surgery on a young female and the grave of a "warrior"—but his most important discovery was that there were two distinct periods of occupation by the Anasazi. In the 1930s Morris returned to Aztec and supervised the reconstruction of the Great Kiva, which stands today virtually as it did eight centuries ago when it was a center of Anasazi ceremonial life. Morris anticipated the refinement of the archeologist's art that the decades would bring. He was content to leave portions unexcavated for investigations by future archeologists certain to bring better techniques to the job.

THE GREAT KIVA

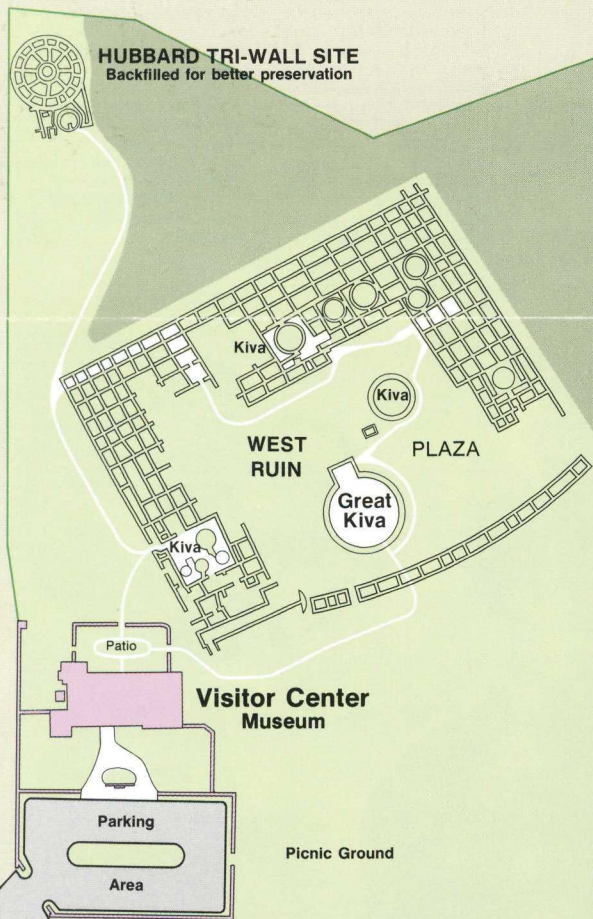
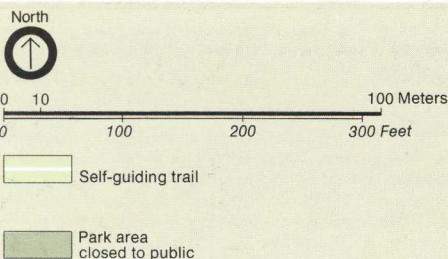


A marvel of prehistoric engineering, this kiva was built by the Chacoans toward the end of their occupation. It was remodeled by the Mesa Verdeans but used only a short time before

being abandoned.

Excavated by Morris in 1921 and reconstructed by him in 1934, it is the only restored great kiva in the Southwest.

© GPO: 1987-181-415/60121



The Ruins of Aztec

Aztec is remarkable for its wealth of ruins concentrated in a small area. Besides the mammoth West Ruin and the enigmatical Hubbard tri-wall site, there are two other major complexes and at least half a dozen mounds that may be either ruins or trash heaps within the site's 27 acres. Except for the West Ruin, the Hubbard site, and part of the East Ruin, none of the other sites have been excavated, and only a few have been sampled. Some day investigations of these ruins may shed new light on the two periods of occupation.

For a tour of the main ruins, follow the self-guiding trail which begins outside the visitor center.

The West Ruin can be likened to a modern apartment building. It had from 350 to 400 rooms and stood three stories high in some places. As many as 200 or 300 persons may have lived here at one time. The pueblo was built between AD 1106 and 1124 and occupied by a people of Chacoan affinities. It was remodeled between 1225 and 1240 and inhabited by a people akin to the Mesa Verdeans.

The Hubbard Site is one of a handful of tri-wall structures in the Southwest. The inner space was a kiva, itself built on the site of an earlier kiva. While there is general agreement on the religious nature of the structure, no one knows why it took

exactly this shape. The most recent investigation suggests that the structure was built after the Chacoan West Ruin but before the Mesa Verdean occupation.

The rest of the park is closed to the public.

Mound F is also one of those mysterious tri-walled structures. Almost twice the diameter of the Hubbard ruin, this structure housed a kiva at its center.

East Ruin, 400 feet long by 180, and its annex are really two house blocks which date from Mesa Verdean times.

Little is known about Earl Morris Ruin. The archeologist may have run a few tests on the site, but if so, he kept no record of his findings.

To 550 To Aztec
0.6mi 1.4mi
1.0km 2.3km