

Canyon de Chelly

national monument · arizona



Canyon de Chelly National Monument / Arizona

These awesome canyons sheltered prehistoric Pueblo Indians for 1,000 years and served as an ancestral stronghold of the Navajo Indians. With its beautiful, steep-walled canyons and many ruins of prehistoric Indian dwellings nestled below towering cliffs or perched on high ledges, this monument typifies the colorful Southwestern Indian country. Adding to this atmosphere are the present-day Navajo Indian homes that are scattered along the canyon floors.

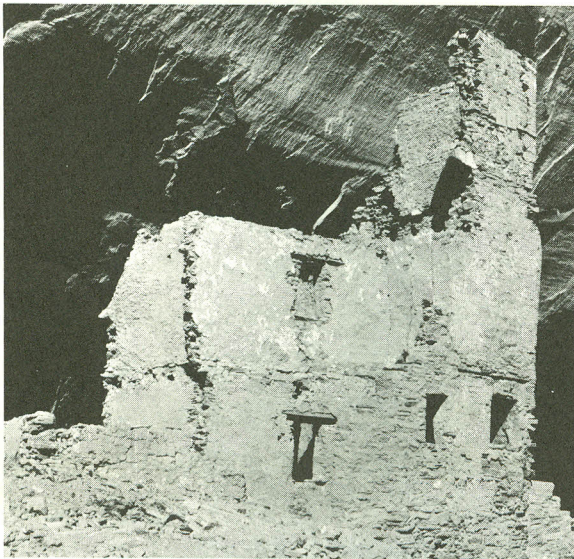
The Canyons

The name *De Chelly* is a Spanish corruption of the Navajo word "Tsegi," which means roughly "rock canyon." The Spanish pronunciation "day shay-ye" has gradually changed through English usage, and the name is now pronounced "d'SHAY."

The Spanish name of the chief tributary of Canyon de Chelly, *Canyon del Muerto*, means "Canyon of the Dead." It received its name in 1882, when a Smithsonian Institution expedition under James Stevenson found the remains of prehistoric Indian burials in this canyon.

The Rio de Chelly rises near the Chuska Mountains close to the Arizona-New Mexico line and winds a tortuous course westward emptying into the Chinle Wash just west of the monument. Except for the last few miles, the Rio de Chelly and its tributaries are enclosed by vertical-walled canyons which range in depth from about 1,000 feet to only 30 feet at the mouth of Canyon de Chelly proper.

Antelope House



The streams of this region flow during the rainy seasons and during the spring runoff of mountain snows; at other times they are dry. Sandstones, chiefly the De Chelly formation of Permian age, laid down more than 200 million years ago, compose the canyon walls. The reddish hue of the cliffs varies in intensity with the time of day.

Indian History

In the canyons are ruins of several hundred prehistoric Indian villages, most of them built between A.D. 350 and 1300. The earliest known Indian occupants constructed individual, circular pithouses, so called because the lower parts of the dwellings were pits dug into the ground. Their chief weapon was a spear-throwing device, now called an atlatl. Not until later did they use the bow and arrow. They grew crops of maize and squash and made excellent baskets, sandals, and other woven articles; but they did not make pottery. Because of their fine basketry, these earliest Indians are commonly referred to as Basketmakers.

In later centuries, the Basketmakers adopted many new ideas which were introduced into this area, such as the making of pottery, the bow and arrow, and bean cultivation. The style of their houses gradually changed through the years until finally they were no longer living in pithouses but were building rectangular houses of stone masonry above the ground which were connected together in compact villages. These changes basically altered Basketmaker life; and, because of the new "apartment house" style of their homes, the canyon dwellers after 700 are called Pueblos. Pueblo is the Spanish word for village, and it refers to the compact village life of these later people. Most of the large cliff houses in these canyons were built between 1100 and 1300, in the Pueblo period.

Ring basket of split yucca leaves. A type in common use from at least A.D. 1100 to the present.





*Water jar of a type used
from about A.D. 900 to 1150.*



*Decorated general-purpose
pottery bowl*

*Part of the colorful
Navajo painting at
Standing Cow Ruin*



During the 1200's, a prolonged drought parched what is now the Four Corners region of Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico. About 1300, the drought, and perhaps other causes, forced the people of Canyon de Chelly and other nearby Pueblo centers to abandon their homes and scatter to other parts of the Southwest. Some of the present-day Pueblo Indians of Arizona and New Mexico are descendants of these pre-Columbian people. The canyons continued to be occupied sporadically by the early Hopi Indians of Arizona, also related to these Pueblo people. The Hopi were probably here only during the times when they were growing and harvesting crops.

About 1700 the Navajo Indians, who were then concentrated in northern New Mexico, began to occupy Canyon de Chelly. An aggressive people related culturally and linguistically to the various Apache Indians in the Southwest, they raided for a century and a half the Pueblo Indian villages and Spanish settlements along the Rio Grande Valley. These attacks inspired the successive governments of New Mexico (Spanish, Mexican, and American)

Mummy Cave Ruin



to make reprisals, and Canyon de Chelly became one of the chief Navajo strongholds.

In 1805 a Spanish punitive expedition under Lt. Antonio Narbona, who later became governor of the Province of New Mexico, fought an all-day battle with a band of Navajos fortified in a rock shelter in Canyon del Muerto. Narbona's official report to the Governor stated that 115 Navajos were killed, including 90 warriors. Because of this, the rock shelter is called Massacre Cave.

Navajo raids continued into the American period. A military campaign was begun, and in 1864 a detachment of United States cavalry under Kit Carson engaged the Navajos in Canyon de Chelly. The raiding was brought to an end by the removal of more than 8,000 Navajos to new lands in eastern New Mexico. This first reservation experiment failed, and after 4 years the Navajos were permitted to return to their homeland.

Today, many Navajos are salaried employees. They still farm in a limited way, but sheep herding, which they acquired from the Spaniards in the 1700's, is declining among them. Their distinctive circular houses of logs and poles are called hogans.

Seeing the Park

For good views of the canyons and ruins, take the two rim drives. SOUTH RIM DRIVE, 36 miles round trip, leads to five overlooks; NORTH RIM DRIVE, 32 miles round trip, leads to three overlooks. Some of the highlights of these drives:

- Views of First Ruin and Junction Ruin from Junction Overlook.
- White House Ruin, the best known Anasazi cliff dwelling in the canyon. It is named after a long wall in the upper ruin that is covered with white plaster. The ruin is reached over a 2½-mile roundtrip trail from White House Overlook. A guide is not required for this hike, but you must stay on the trail going to and from the ruin.
- Spider Rock, an 800-foot sandstone spire rising from the canyon floor at the junction of Canyon de Chelly and Monument Canyon.
- Antelope House, named for the colorful drawings of antelope by a Navajo artist 150 years ago.
- Mummy Cave, one of the most spectacular dwellings in the park. This site was occupied from A.D. 300 to 1300.

PICTOGRAPHS may be seen at many other places in these canyons. Some date from the prehistoric Basketmaker and Pueblo periods, but probably the finest are of Navajo origin. On the cliff face at *Standing Cow Ruin*, in Canyon del Muerto, is a Navajo painting of a Spanish cavalry unit accompanied by a priest. Another is of a blue-and-white cow, which gave its name to this site.

Travel Into The Canyons

Quicksand, deep dry sand, and flash floods make the canyons hazardous. For your safety, the protection of the many fragile ruins, and respect for the privacy of the Navajos whose land this is, *you are allowed to travel in the canyons only when accompanied by a park ranger or an authorized guide.* Travel to and from White House Ruin on the hiking trail is the only exception to this rule. If you wish to hike elsewhere or take your own four-wheel-drive vehicle into the canyons, the park ranger on duty at the visitor center will help you arrange for an authorized guide and will provide you with the necessary permit. In winter and at certain other times of the year, the canyons are impassable.

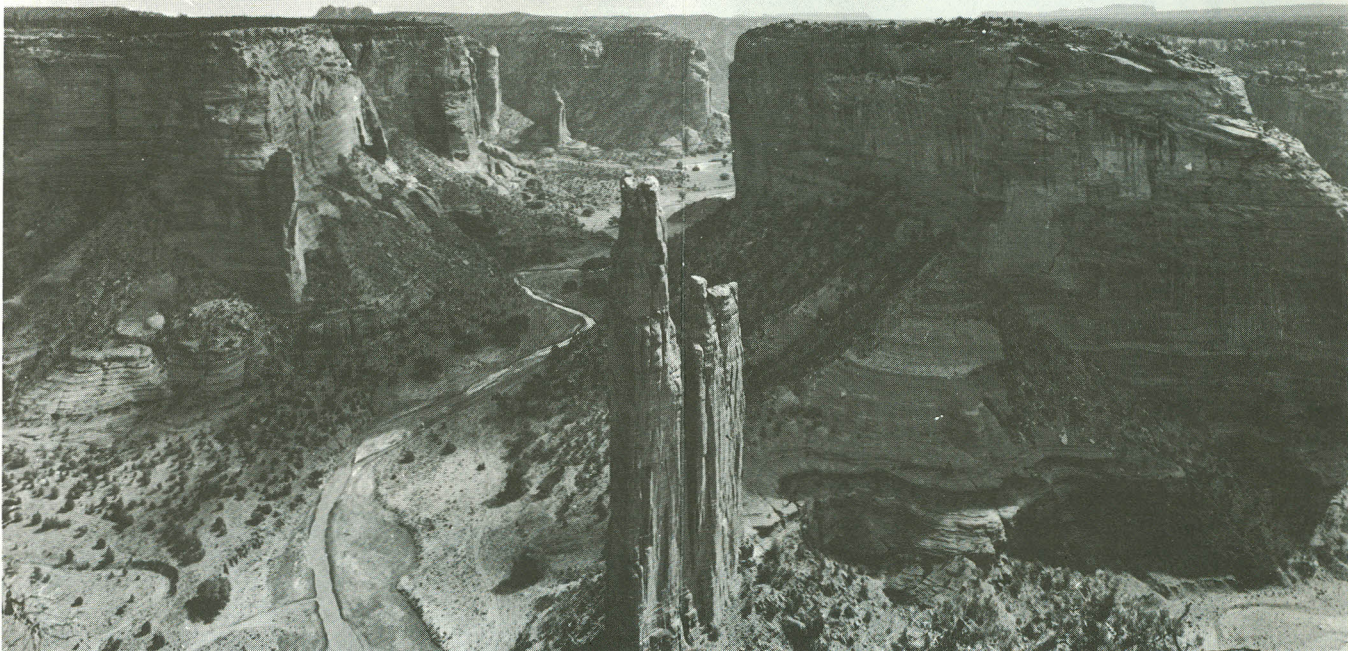
When conditions are suitable, Thunderbird Lodge, near monument headquarters, offers commercial trips up the floors of the canyons in vehicles especially equipped for canyon travel.

Please do not pick up or remove any objects or climb or sit on walls of canyons or ruins. And please do not enter a hogan or take photographs of Indians without their consent.

A Word of Caution

This is a natural scenic area with canyons, cliffs, loose rock, and other natural hazards. Make your visit a safe one for you and your family.

Spider Rock and view of Canyon de Chelly from the rim



Accommodations

You can get meals and lodging at Thunderbird Lodge. It is well to make reservations in advance by writing to Thunderbird Lodge, Chinle, AZ 86503. Camping in the canyons is not permitted, but fireplaces, tables, and restrooms are available at Cottonwood Campground near monument headquarters. Campers are advised to bring their own fuel. Gasoline, groceries, and general merchandise can be obtained at nearby trading posts.

Administration

Canyon de Chelly National Monument, established on April 1, 1931, and containing more than 130 square miles, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 588, Chinle, AZ 86503, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

National Park Service

U. S. Department of the Interior

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