



Foundation Document Overview

Aztec Ruins National Monument

New Mexico



Contact Information

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Purpose



AZTEC RUINS NATIONAL MONUMENT protects an exceptionally well-preserved great house community along the banks of the Animas River, and provides opportunities for greater understanding of the evolution of the Chacoan culture.

Significance

Significance statements express why Aztec Ruins National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Aztec Ruins National Monument contains some of the best-preserved monumental great house architecture in the Southwest. This community, strategically constructed along the Animas River, is characterized by its symmetrical layout and unique complex of architectural features that include rare tri-walled structures.
- Aztec Ruins National Monument protects the only fully reconstructed great kiva in the Southwest, providing visitors a unique opportunity to connect to the past and experience the scale of this monumental architecture.
- Aztec Ruins National Monument illustrates the evolution and adaptation of cultures, including the Chacoan and Mesa Verdean traditions that continue today through American Indian peoples who trace their history here.
- The incredible condition of the great house architecture and landscape modifications today highlights the long-standing role of Aztec Ruins National Monument as a leader in the science of preservation. Because original wooden roofs still cover many rooms, extensive tree ring dating has been completed, making Aztec Ruins one of the best dated sites in the Southwest.



Fundamental Resources and Values



Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Great House Architecture and Community**
- **State of Preservation**
- **Animas River and Water Resources**
- **Reconstructed Great Kiva and Earl Morris Residence**

Aztec Ruins National Monument contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **World Heritage Site**
- **Public Works Features**

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The monumental scale and accessibility of the remarkably well-preserved Aztec West Ruin great house and its associated archeological resources foster contemplation of the rich culture of the Ancestral Puebloan builders and offer evocative and inspirational connections to the people themselves.
- The world-class resources of Aztec Ruins National Monument provide an opportunity to explore the complexity, diversity, and longevity of the cultures of the Four Corners region and their relationship to our overall understanding of human history.
- The evolution and interaction of archeological and indigenous perspectives with other scholarly and popular viewpoints about Aztec Ruins National Monument increase opportunities to understand and appreciate this special place.
- The proximity of the Aztec Ruins National Monument landscape to the contemporary city of Aztec provides a rare opportunity to compare and contrast how different people interact with their environment.



Description

Located along the Animas River in northwest New Mexico, Aztec Ruins National Monument contains some of the best-preserved monumental great house architecture in the Southwest. Characterized by its symmetrical layout and unique complex of architectural features, the monument protects the core of an extensive ceremonial center and is indicative of the cultural expression that occurred from the late AD 1000s to 1300. Original intact masonry, wooden roofs, and tri-wall structures highlight a strategically constructed community located between two major centers—Chaco Canyon to the south and Mesa Verde to the north. The number, variety, and massive scale of the structures concentrated in this area are remarkable. Along with the monument's expansive West Ruin and reconstructed Great Kiva are the remnants of many buildings, roads, earthworks, and kivas on the nearby terrace and bottom lands that contribute to the greater Chacoan community.

Established in 1923 as 4.6-acre site to protect a "ruin of great antiquity and historical interest," the monument was expanded through several boundary changes and now encompasses 318 acres within the city of Aztec, New Mexico. Early farmers took advantage of the perennial waters of the Animas River, and the monument's first inhabitants were strongly influenced by Chacoan culture in architecture and ceremonial life. The population at Aztec ebbed at times but persisted through cycles of drought and cultural changes. A formal layout of the settlement, purposeful landscape modifications, and the orientation and visual relationships among the buildings indicate a grand design.



Most prominent are the great houses with many connected rooms that surround a central plaza. The monument's largest structure, the West Ruin, resembles the great houses built at Chaco and elsewhere in the Southwest. It consists of at least 400 contiguous rooms of three stories and numerous kivas, including the Great Kiva that was likely used for communitywide events. Earl Morris's pioneering excavation and reconstruction efforts between 1916 and 1934 made the Great Kiva internationally famous. The historic Earl Morris residence, now serving as the monument's visitor center, is composed of architectural stone and ancient wood recovered from the massive archeological site.

By the late 1200s, the monument's inhabitants had left Aztec Ruins. A combination of factors influenced their move, including drought, depletion of resources, social changes, religious and political issues, and perhaps the allure of better-watered country. Many American Indian peoples of the Southwest trace their history here, maintaining deep spiritual ties through oral tradition, prayer, and ceremony.

In addition to its inclusion as a national park system unit, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated Aztec Ruins National Monument, along with Chaco Culture National Historical Park and five Chacoan sites managed by the Bureau of Land Management, as a World Heritage Site in 1987. With this listing, the national monument became one of 23 World Heritage Sites in the United States.

