

Hovenweep

National Monument
Colorado/Utah

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



The Towers of Hovenweep

The canyon and mesa country north of the San Juan River contains a number of archeological sites where the ancestors of today's Pueblo Indians once lived. Today round, square, and D-shaped towers at the heads of canyons are the most visible remains that mark the location of once-thriving communities. Though these structures have seen no human inhabitants in more than 700 years, they are still impressive. Since modern Americans have become acquainted with Hovenweep, all have wondered why these towers were built and what the communities were like that the inhabitants created. The archeological record provides many suggestions and tantalizing bits of information and are the basis on which today's theories are formed. Most dwellings have been constructed directly on the edge of a canyon, not a most practical location for safety and accessibility. Some structures have been positioned over isolated or irregular boulders. Many are associated with springs and seeps near the heads of the canyons. These positions suggest that the inhabitants were protecting something, if not themselves, then perhaps the water, always a valuable commodity in an agricultural society. Pollen studies show that much of the forest cover had been removed, indicating perhaps depleted resources and a growing population. Lack of resources may be one of the explanations for their inexplicable departure in the late 1200s.



Hovenweep Castle (above), Horseshoe Tower, and the pictograph (center, right) help to tell the story of these ancient peoples. Photos: Laurence Parent.

The presence today of tall towers, tumbled piles of shaped stone, remains of multi-room pueblos, small cliff dwellings, pottery shards, and rock art scattered over the canyon rims and slopes leaves little doubt that a sizable population once lived in this rugged, yet beautiful, high desert landscape. Many Pueblo structures and nearby tower walls are still standing, even after seven centuries of weathering. Some walls still reach more than 20 feet in height though much of the exterior mortar has long since disappeared. Many walls are now piles of rubble. Visitors are able to walk along quiet, primitive trails and wonder what these communities must have been like so long ago

when hundreds, or perhaps even thousands, of people lived on this plateau. Hovenweep is truly a place to "ponder the past."

The first reports of these structures were made by W.D. Huntington, the leader of a Mormon expedition into southeastern Utah in 1854. The name "Hovenweep" was first used by pioneer photographer William H. Jackson in 1874. It is a Paiute/Ute word meaning deserted valley. In 1917-18, J.W. Fewkes of the Smithsonian surveyed the area. He recommended the structures be protected. On March 2, 1923, President Warren G. Harding proclaimed Hovenweep a unit of the National Park System.

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The People of Hovenweep

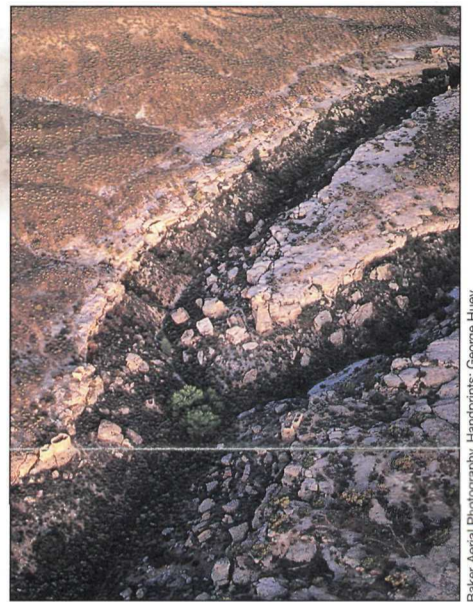
The work that archeologists have done throughout the Four Corners area has provided us with intriguing information about the various peoples who lived in this portion of the San Juan River Basin. Evidence of nomadic hunters from ten or eleven thousand years ago, though scanty, has been found. Most research and investigations, however, have focused on the more recent time period when the stone structures were built. Archeological work has primarily focused on the period 700 to 1300 when the population of the area was at its greatest. Examination of these communities and many other remains in the Four Corners region tell us, too, that these villages were part of a much larger Ancestral Puebloan society that occupied this region until about 1300. Today the descendants of these people live in the Puebloan communities that are found today in New Mexico and Arizona.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, some Archaic Age hunter-gatherers started growing crops in this region. At first they took shelter in shallow caves, but soon they constructed pithouses in the region's valleys and on many nearby mesa tops. About the year

700, small villages of multiple-room dwellings became common. Multi-storied structures dotted the landscape from 1100 on. The towers of Hovenweep belong to the later years of this period.

These people raised corn, beans, squash, amaranth, and other crops in small fields and terraces that used check dams to bring moisture to their crops. They became expert at using the resources of this environment, which was adequate for dryland agriculture. Pottery, jewelry, and clothing have been found, telling us that these villages had become a well-developed and complex society. Some evidence seems to suggest that these people were sophisticated astronomers, able to predict the seasons. Such knowledge would have been as important to an agricultural people as having an adequate supply of moisture. Yet nothing lasts forever. By the late 1200s climatic changes, overuse of resources, and perhaps pressure from outside forced the people to leave and journey south to the Rio Grande Valley and as far west as the Hopi villages of Arizona.

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Aerial view of the Square Tower Community at Little Ruin Canyon



The Twin Towers; also visible in the lower left corner of the picture above.

About Your Visit

Getting There

Hovenweep is open year around. Paved roads lead from both Cortez, Colorado and Blanding, Utah. Some roadways in the area remain very rough and may be impassable in stormy weather. Visitors should inquire locally before traveling any nonsurfaced roadways.

Hiking Trails

A self-guiding trail leads from the ranger station to the Square Tower and its associated structures. Park rangers are on duty all year to patrol sites. Ranger-guided interpretive tours are available on a seasonal basis. Group tours are available with reservations. Hiking is limited to established trails.

Camping

There is a small but modern campground near the ranger station, which is open seasonally on a first-come, first-served basis. It is designed for tent camping, but at a few sites vehicles 25 feet or shorter can be accommodated. RVers note: there are no pull-throughs, no dump stations, and

cornering is tight. Supplies and gasoline are not available in the park. Gasoline and limited grocery items are available at the Ismay Trading Post.

Safety

As in any unfamiliar, isolated, and natural area there are inherent dangers. Look before you step to make sure the path is

clear. Stay away from canyon rims, and watch small children. Be sure to drink plenty of water. You can easily become dehydrated in the low humidity of the desert.

Preservation

All structures and objects are protected by the full force of the Antiquities Act and by other federal laws.

Leave things as you find them; do not deface any structure.

Information
Hovenweep National Monument is administered by the National Park Service. For information call 970-562-4282 or check www.nps.gov/hove on the internet.

