



Visitor Guide



Ancestors of today's Pueblo people built the standing architecture of Hovenweep approximately 800 years ago.

Facts & History

President Warren G. Harding established Hovenweep National Monument on March 2, 1923. The monument protects five prehistoric ancestral Puebloan canyon-head villages located along a 16-mile stretch of land intersecting the Utah-Colorado border west of Cortez, Colorado.

The Square Tower Unit is the largest section of the monument and contains the most extensive archeological remains as well as the visitor center and a 31-site campground. It is important that you come to the visitor center first for an orientation to the monument and assistance in planning your visit. All of the state highways and county roads leading to the Square Tower Unit from Cortez, Colorado, and Blanding or Bluff, Utah, are paved.

In addition to the Square Tower Unit there are the “outlying” units which include Holly, Horseshoe, Hackberry, Cutthroat Castle, and Cajon. The Holly, Horseshoe, and Hackberry units are located about four miles northeast of Square Tower. The Cutthroat Castle Unit is about eight miles northeast of Square Tower, and Cajon is about nine miles southwest. Significant portions (one to two miles) of the roads leading to these outlying units are unmaintained dirt and gravel; we recommend a high-clearance vehicle for visiting these sites.

Square Tower Unit offers the widest variety of hiking opportunities. Here a self-guiding, two-mile (3.2 km) loop trail will take you entirely around the monument's largest archeological site and provide both panoramic and close-up views of its canyon and well preserved structures. Shorter hikes are also possible at Square Tower including an accessible 300-yard (274 m) sidewalk to a viewpoint overlooking a large portion of the canyon. There are also short hikes at each outlying site ranging from 0.25 to 1.6 miles (400 m to 2.5 km) roundtrip. The longest hike is an eight-mile roundtrip (12 km) hike that connects the Square Tower Unit with the Holly Unit, providing a longer scenic backcountry hike.

Hovenweep National Monument and its outlying sites sit on a portion of the Great Sage Plain known as Cajon Mesa. This region is defined by deep, wide canyons fed by shallower tributary drainages. Cajon Mesa tilts slightly to the south causing the ephemeral runoff from its canyons to eventually flow into the San Juan River. Aside from rolling expanses of sagebrush, Cajon Mesa's

plant communities include pinyon-juniper woodlands in the higher elevations to the north and desert shrublands to the south.

Human presence on Cajon Mesa can be traced back as far back as 6,000 – 8,000 BCE (Before Common Era). Nomadic hunter-gatherers would pass through on their seasonal rounds, camping near the springs located at the heads of some canyons. Eventually people leading more sedentary, agricultural lifestyles began settling the region around 200 CE (Common Era). Cajon Mesa remained relatively uninhabited until approximately 900 CE. Then as the region's population grew and more land was needed for agriculture, small home sites developed across the more open southern expanses of the mesa.

For reasons not completely understood, in the late 1100s and early 1200s, these more widely dispersed habitations began consolidating into communities around the water sources located at or near canyon heads. This “aggregation” appears to intensify with the onset of an increasingly arid period that culminated with a prolonged severe drought beginning in the 1270s.

The structural remains at Hovenweep represent some of the best preserved examples of these ancestral Puebloan canyon-head communities in existence. Tree ring dating indicates most of these structures were built in the mid-1200s beginning in the 1230s and ending in the late 1270s.

By 1300 the Puebloan people throughout the Four Corners region had departed, emigrating primarily to central Arizona and the Rio Grande valley in New Mexico. Their abandoned communities at Hovenweep stood relatively undisturbed for centuries until discovered by a Mormon expedition in the mid 1850s. The Hopi, Zuni, and Rio Grande Pueblo tribes are now considered the modern-day descendants of the people who created these memorable structures centuries ago.

The land surrounding Hovenweep is held by the Navajo Nation, Bureau of Land Management, State of Utah, and private landowners. Respect the regulations and property rights of these agencies and individuals when travelling in the area.



The distinctive masonry found at Hovenweep shows considerable skill in construction techniques.

Protect the Past for the Future

We need your help to preserve Hovenweep National Monument. Here are several things you can do that will protect Hovenweep for future generations:

- Stay on designated trails at all times and be careful where you step. Walking off-trail damages the biological soil crust which is vital for erosion control and plant nutrition. It can take decades for the crust to repair itself.
- Areas behind chain barriers are closed to protect fragile archeological sites, soil, and vegetation. Do not cross these barriers.
- Pets are allowed in the monument and on trails, but must be leashed (six-foot maximum) at all times.
- Eat at picnic areas or the campground only, and do not feed wildlife. Store food securely, and throw all trash in receptacles provided. Offering food or leaving it unattended can attract animals and insects to places they do not belong.
- Take photographs; do not take artifacts, no matter how small. Any person who excavates, removes, damages, alters, or defaces archeological resources on federal land is subject to fine and/or arrest.

Protect Yourself

- Bring enough water for yourself and your pet(s).
- Wear sunscreen and hat; rest often.
- Respect the plants and wildlife - some species can be harmful.

Map

