

mesa verde

how to see the park

The park entrance is midway between Cortez and Mancos on U.S. 160. It is 34 kilometers (21 miles) from the entrance to the museum and the Chapin Mesa ruins area. The Morfield campground is 6 kilometers (4 miles) from the entrance. The Far View Visitor Center is 25 kilometers (15 miles) away. The narrow, mountainous road has sharp curves and steep grades. A limited number of turnouts are provided for emergency parking or to allow for picture taking along the way. For your safety, do not park on the roadway.

Depending on traffic and weather conditions, allow at least 45 minutes to make this drive. Park roads are generally designed as scenic drives with reduced speed limits. The average speed limit in the park is 55 kilometers (35 miles) per hour.

There are scheduled flights to Cortez and Durango. The nearest railroads are at Grand Junction, Colo., and Gallup, N. Mex., with bus service to Cortez from those points. Buses run to Mesa Verde National Park from Cortez mid-May to mid-October. All nearby cities have rent-a-car service.

To get the most out of your visit, we urge you first to go to either the Far View Visitor Center (open only in the summer 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.) or to the Chapin Mesa Museum (open 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. in summer and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the year). At each location uniformed personnel will help you plan your visit and answer any questions you may have. Exhibits illustrate the arts and crafts of the ancient people and of the Indians now living in the Four Corners region.

Throughout the park, the museum, roadside, and trailside exhibits, self-guided and guided trips, and summer campfire programs will help to give you a glimpse into the lives of the pre-Columbian inhabitants. Nowhere else in the United States is the sequence of their architectural development so accessible as along the Ruins Road.

Morfield

Morfield campground, open from May 1 through October 31 for tents and trailers, has restrooms and single and group campsites. Reservations cannot be made. When the campground is closed, camping or overnight parking is not permitted anywhere in the park. Commercial campgrounds are located near the park. Camping is allowed only in established campsites. Camps should not be left unattended for more than 24 hours. Each campsite contains a table, benches, and wood or charcoal burning grills for which fuel can be bought at the store. The natural environment at Mesa Verde is very fragile; therefore the gathering of firewood or injury to trees or shrubs is prohibited. There are no utility hookups, but the campground has a disposal station for dumping trailer holding tanks. Groceries, gifts, souvenirs, carry-out food, a gasoline station, showers, and laundry facilities are also available. All services and facilities are closed from approximately mid-October to mid-May.

Campfire programs are conducted each evening from early June to September. These programs deal with the pre-Columbian and modern Indians of the Southwest and with the archeology, history, and natural history of the area.

During the summer, nondenominational and Roman Catholic religious services are held within the park.

Park Point

Located halfway between the entrance and Chapin Mesa, Park Point offers superb views of the entire Four Corners region. The park fire lookout station is here. The ranger will be pleased to answer questions when he is not involved with his duties. There are no visitor facilities at Park Point.

From a distance the canyons appear empty (top), but looking closer one finds dwellings (middle) tucked into the crevices and caves below the mesa tops. The view (bottom) from inside one of the caves shows the fine workmanship that went into the construction.



Far View

The visitor center contains displays of contemporary Indian arts and crafts. Gasoline is available at the service station. Concessioner-operated commercial bus tours of Chapin Mesa and the free tours of Wetherill Mesa leave from this point.

Lodging is available from mid-May to mid-October. From June 1 to Labor Day it is advisable to make reservations with the Mesa Verde Co., P.O. Box 277, Mancos, CO 81328. Call toll free (out-of-state) 800-525-5421; (Colorado only) 800-392-6797. Meals are served at the Far View Lodge restaurant during normal meal hours and continuously throughout the day at the cafeteria. A gift shop specializing in American Indian handicrafts is in the cafeteria building.

Services And Accommodations

From mid-May to mid-October accommodations, facilities, and services are available. Maximum interpretive services begin mid-June and last until Labor Day. From mid-November to mid-April all concession facilities, including gasoline, food, and lodging, are unavailable. The museum and Ruins Road are open. Tours of Spruce Tree House are conducted all year when trail and weather conditions permit.

In summer, daytime temperatures are comfortably warm with highs ranging from 29°C (85°F) to 38°C (100°F). Evening temperatures are cool with lows ranging from 13°C (55°F) to 18°C (65°F). Winter highs range from 4°C (40°F) to 10°C (50°F) with lows of -32°C (-25°F) to -10°C (15°F). Snow covered ground is predominant. Elevations vary from nearly 2,200 meters (7,000 feet) at the park entrance and the Chapin Mesa area to more than 2,600 meters (8,500 feet) at Park Point; Morfield campground is 2,380 meters (7,800 feet) and Far View Lodge is 2,452 meters (8,080 feet).

For detailed information on services at Chapin and Wetherill Mesas see the reverse side.

Regulations

The Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 prohibits the appropriation, injury, destruction, or removal from place of any object of antiquity, or the excavation, injury, or destruction of any ruin on Federal land. In accordance with these provisions, you are informed that entering a cliff dwelling without a park ranger present will result in a citation and fine. Feeding, capturing, or teasing wildlife and picking, cutting, or damaging any wildflower or other native shrub or tree is also prohibited. It's fun to see the different types of wildlife and plants that can be found in the park, but remember to LOOK only. We solicit your help in preserving the park.

Firearms are prohibited; they must be cased, broken down, or otherwise packed while in the park.

Fires caused by careless visitors could burn the park's natural vegetation. It would not recover in our lifetime.

Don't litter; use the trash containers in the park. Pets must be physically restrained at all times; they are not allowed in public buildings or on trails. Motor vehicles are allowed only on roadways, turnouts, or parking areas. Report all accidents to the nearest park ranger as soon as possible.

Camping is permitted only in designated campgrounds.

Check at the ranger station for the location of hiking trails. To protect the fragile, irreplaceable ruins, hiking is restricted to only four trails within the park.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

Visits to cliff dwellings, whether on a ranger-guided tour or a self-guided walk, tend to be quite strenuous. Often the climbing of steps and ladders is required. Adequate footwear, such as hiking boots or sturdy shoes, is recommended for these trips. Strenuous activity at the high elevations of the park may adversely affect those persons who experience heart or respiratory ailments. You may wish to reconsider climbing into and out of the cliff dwellings. With the exception of Balcony House, all major cliff dwellings can be viewed from overlooks on the canyon rims.

Parents should be especially alert for their children's safety when nearing the canyon rim cliff areas. Please do not throw rocks or other objects, for other visitors may be below.

Bicycle riding is encouraged along the park roads and motorists should be on the lookout for bicycles on the narrow roads. Extend to them the same courtesies you would any other vehicle.

If you are involved in an accident or are injured, contact a ranger. Emergency first aid is provided at the chief ranger's office at park headquarters and at the Morfield ranger station.

While every effort is made to provide for your safety, you must remain alert and cautious. Your safety and your children's safety are of primary concern to us.

We're Joining the Metric World

The National Park Service is introducing metric measurements in its publications to help Americans become acquainted with the metric system and to make interpretation more meaningful for park visitors from other nations.

About 1,300 years ago, a group of Indians who lived in the Four Corners country picked Mesa Verde for their home. They lived and prospered on the mesa and in its canyons, but near the end of the 13th century they abandoned their homes.

When these people departed, they left their villages and many of their personal possessions behind. Today these relics are preserved in Mesa Verde National Park, which occupies part of a large plateau rising high above Montezuma and Mancos Valleys.

Archeologists who studied the relics have named the earliest people to live at Mesa Verde Basket Makers in recognition of their impressive skill in that craft. They also made pottery, but at this stage in their history, the pottery lacked the quality of their baskets. At first these people lived in pithouses, dwellings dug into the ground so that the walls of the pit were the walls of the house. They clustered their pit houses to form small villages, usually on the mesa top, but occasionally in the caves of the cliffs. Crops of beans, corn, and squash were grown in the rich, red, windblown soil of the mesa tops. Dogs and turkeys were their only domestic animals. The turkeys seem to have been raised more for their feathers, which were woven into blankets for the cold winter months, than for food.

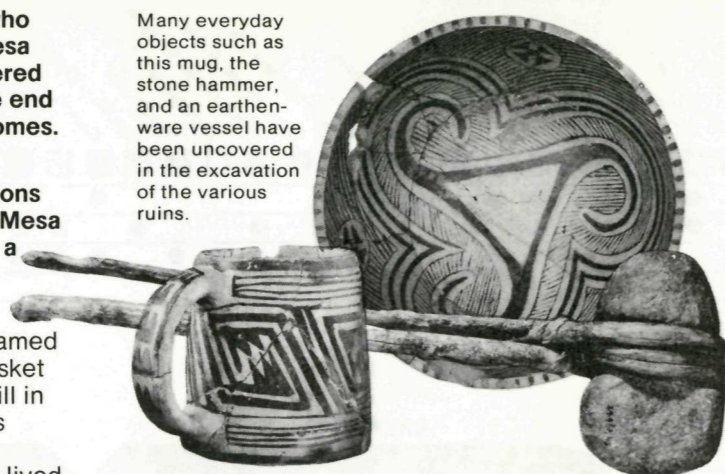


For many years the Basket Makers prospered on the mesa. By the middle of the eighth century their descendants, whom we know as Pueblo Indians, had begun building houses above ground. They set poles upright in the ground to form the outline of a house, then wove sticks among the poles. They made the roof the same way and added a thick coating of mud to weatherproof both walls and roof. The houses were built one against another in a long curving row. Frequently, they built one or two deep pit houses in front of the crescent-shaped rowhouses. Perhaps these were the beginnings of the underground religious rooms—kivas—of later times.

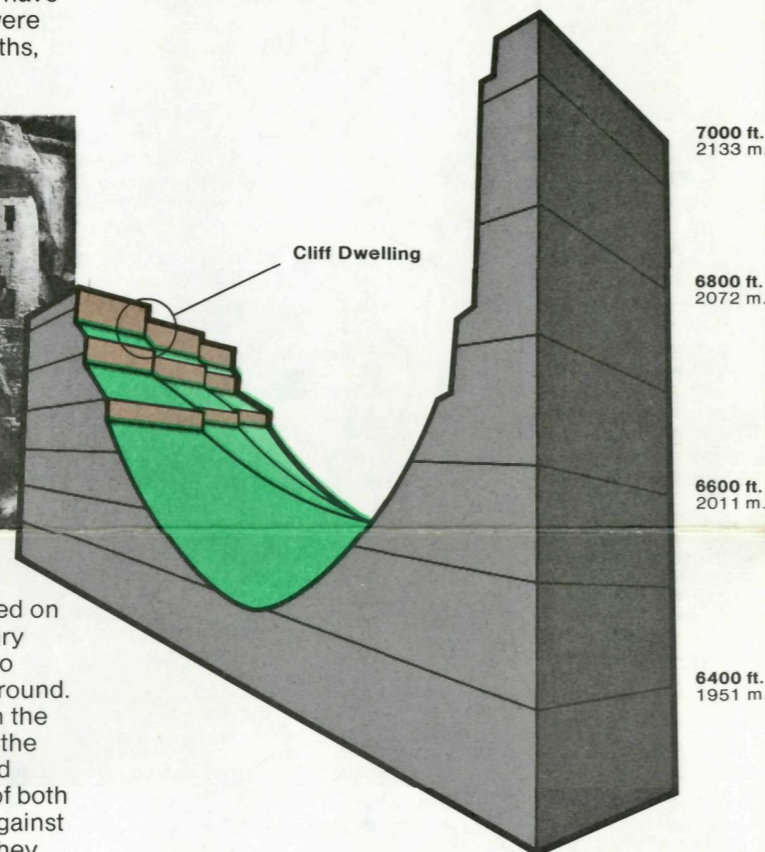
Before the year 1000, stone masonry began to replace the pole-and-mud construction. Sturdy, compact apartment-like buildings were built, and by the 12th century, they were exceptionally well made. Some stood as high as three stories and contained more than 50 rooms. Often the rooms were built around courtyards that contained several kivas.

Near the end of the 12th century something caused the Mesa Verde people to make another great change in their lives, for they began to abandon their houses on the mesa tops and move down into the caves in the cliffs. There they built the cliff dwellings we find today. Why did they make this drastic move? The caves may have been uncomfortable places to live—hot in summer, cold in winter. Living in the caves required a difficult climb up and down the cliffs to reach the cornfields, and it must also have been hazardous for the children and old people. One guess is that this was a time of warfare—either with local Indians fighting among themselves or with a foreign enemy tribe—and the caves were sought out for defensive purposes.

Many everyday objects such as this mug, the stone hammer, and an earthenware vessel have been uncovered in the excavation of the various ruins.



The diagram exaggerates the geography, but it clearly shows the small area of the canyons that was suitable for cliff dwellings. Situated in crevices that had been carved by wind and water erosion, the dwellings were high above the canyon floor, a defensive but precarious location.



At any rate this period of living in cliff dwellings lasted less than 100 years and before the close of the 13th century the cliff dwellers left Mesa Verde forever. What caused the abandonment remains a mystery. Perhaps the people tired of strife. Perhaps they left because of drought. We know that the 13th century, particularly the last half, was a time of repeated drought and successive crop failure.

We think that when the cliff dwellers left here they traveled to the south and southeast—down to the valley of the Rio Grande and its tributaries. They may have joined existing villages of Pueblo Indians, or they may have established villages of their own. Perhaps both. Whatever happened, it seems likely that some of the Pueblo Indians in central New Mexico are at least partly descended from the cliff dwellers.

After the Indians left, the cliff dwellings lay silent for centuries. The Spaniards came into the area in the mid-18th century but did not find the ruins. The name Mesa Verde, which means "green table," surely dates from the time of their explorations. Not until 1874 was Two-Story Cliff House discovered. But it was still 14 years before the many canyons of the mesa began to be explored. In 1906 the area became a national park and the period of scientific excavation began.

Mesa Verde National Park

The park, which is located in extreme southwestern Colorado, was established in 1906 and contains about 21,000 hectares (52,000 acres). It is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent's address is Mesa Verde National Park, CO 81330.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

