



Canyon de Chelly

NATIONAL MONUMENT

A R I Z O N A

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United States Department of the Interior

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Here, awesome canyons, the ancestral stronghold of the Navajo Indian tribe, retain in their red-walled cliffs evidence of a thousand years of prehistoric occupation by long-vanished, pueblo cliff-dweller Indians.

Everything that goes to make up the popular conception of southwestern Indian country is to be found in Canyon de Chelly National Monument—Indians, prehistoric ruins, and a high, beautiful mesa cut by deep canyons. These features make Canyon de Chelly typical of the Navajo country, but the grand scale in which the canyons are carved sets it aside as unique. Seemingly, the cliffs are higher and redder than elsewhere; the Indians more primitive and colorful; and the ruins, built at the bases of sheer cliffs or in caves high on the canyon walls, appeal more to the imagination than do most ruins.

The Canyons

The Rio de Chelly rises near the Arizona-New Mexico line, and follows an extremely tortuous course westward. It empties into the Chinle Wash, which drains north to the San Juan River. Except for the last few miles, the Rio de Chelly is enclosed by vertical cliffs ranging in height from 800 feet at the maximum to 30 feet at the mouth of the canyon.

The streams flow during the rainy seasons and during the spring run-off; at other times of the year they are dry.

During and immediately after periods when the streams are flowing it is dangerous to drive into the canyons because of quicksands. Many automobiles and wagons have bogged down in the sands and have been lost. It is important that none but drivers accustomed to conditions of this sort be allowed to enter the canyons.

The name "de Chelly" is probably a Spanish corruption of the Navajo words

Tse gi which mean approximately "rock canyon."

Monument Canyon has received its name from two great stone monoliths which rise 800 feet above the canyon floor on each side of Monument Creek near its junction with Rio de Chelly.

The name of Canyon del Muerto (Canyon of Death) was applied by Spaniards after a massacre which is described in the section on the Navajo Indians.

The Ruins

There are several hundred prehistoric Indian ruins in the canyons. These range in age from early Basketmaker sites to "Pueblo III" ruins, cliff houses of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Some of these ruins are very large and are among the most famous prehistoric sites in the Southwest. White House, Antelope House, Mummy Cave, and Standing Cow Ruin are the best known.

Mummy Cave and the Basketmakers. During the first several centuries of our era, a group of Indians, whom we

refer to as Basketmakers, occupied the drainage of the San Juan River.

The culture of these people was characterized by the use of a dart thrower (not the later bow and arrow), excellent baskets and woven sandals, and, in the final period of the Basketmaker epoch, pottery-making and the construction of circular houses, the floors of which were sunk a foot or more into the ground.

Mummy Cave is one of the best known Basketmaker sites. It was excavated by Earl Morris for the American Museum of Natural History, New York, in 1926-27. Centuries after the cave had been abandoned by the Basketmakers, Pueblo Indians built their homes over the old pit houses, and now the earlier structures are almost entirely hidden by a three-story cliff dwelling.

The Pueblo Indians. Pueblo Indians, predecessors of such modern tribes as the Tewa and Hopi, developed in the San Juan region, early in the eighth century, from the Basketmakers. The apparent change in race is merely the new custom of flattening the back of the head with a

hard cradleboard. The Pueblos are simply Basketmakers modified by cultural change, possibly with the intrusion of a few newcomers.

The Pueblos also were farmers and raised crops of maize, beans, and pumpkins; their homes were rectangular rooms constructed of masonry entirely above the ground. Later, apparently for defense, these living rooms were grouped into large "apartment houses" and situated in sites which could easily be defended.

White House, Antelope House, Standing Cow, and the masonry structures at Mummy Cave all belong to the later period. White House is so called because a long wall in the upper part of the ruin was plastered with white clay.

At Antelope House the prehistoric Pueblo Indians stood on the roofs of their two- and three-story buildings and painted lively pictures of antelopes on the cliff. The houses have fallen, but the paintings remain, clear, bright and life-like. Standing Cow Ruin received its name from a large Navajo pictograph painted in historic times on the cliff above the fallen walls; the painting is of a blue and white cow. All these ruins, except White House, are in Canyon del Muerto.

The Navajos

Navajo Indians live in the canyons today, farming the same wide spots in which the prehistoric Pueblos raised their crops. The Navajos have lived here for over 200 years.

During the winter of 1804-5 the Navajo men living in Canyon del Muerto went on a raid after establishing their women and children and old men in a



Spider Rock, at the junction of Monument Canyon and Canyon de Chelly

high, safe cave. A Spanish punitive expedition arrived while the men were gone and went up the canyon in search of Indians. One old woman, who had been captured and kept a slave by the Spanish during her youth, taunted the soldiers as they were passing the cave, thus revealing the hiding place.

While some soldiers remained below the cave, others climbed to the top of the cliff and fired from a jutting point down on the Navajos. All the occupants of the cave were killed. It was at this time that Canyon del Muerto received its name. The cave is known as Massacre Cave, and Navajos do not willingly enter it.

During the War between the States, Kit Carson entered the canyons with a detachment of United States Cavalry and rounded up all the Navajos living there. This was a part of an ill-fated scheme of the Government to transport all Navajos to a reservation on the Pecos River, in eastern New Mexico, in an effort to stop raids on towns and ranches. The experiment was not a success, and in a few years the Navajos were allowed to return to their homeland.

White House Ruin



Mummy Cave Ruin, one of the most beautifully situated sites in the Southwest



Administration

Canyon de Chelly National Monument is a part of the National Park System and is administered by the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. The monument has an area of 83,840 acres, and its establishment was authorized by Congress on February 14, 1931.

A custodian resides near the mouth of the canyon. Inquiries concerning road conditions, accommodations, etc., should be addressed to the Custodian, Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Chinle, Ariz.

Other interesting prehistoric cliff dwellings in the National Park System may be seen at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado; Bandelier and Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monuments in New Mexico; and Navajo, Montezuma Castle, Walnut Canyon, and Tonto National Monuments in Arizona.

Approach Road and Facilities

The only feasible means of approach to the monument is from United States Highway No. 66. Visitors from the east

should turn off at Gallup, N. Mex., and travel by way of Ganado, Ariz., to Chinle.

From the west a road runs from Chambers, Ariz., to Ganado, to Chinle. Inquiry should be made concerning road conditions before leaving the highway; in bad weather the roads are sometimes impassable.

Accommodations may be had at Thunderbird Ranch, a guest ranch, which is located across the road from the custodian's residence and office. The operator of Thunderbird Ranch maintains a car especially equipped for canyon travel. This car can be rented for trips.

Rules and Regulations

Visitors are requested to observe the following rules:

1. Do not walk on ruin walls, pick up any souvenir, make any marks or initials on either canyon or ruin walls.
2. Do not enter any hogan or take any pictures of Indians without their consent and that of the ranger in charge of the party.
3. Do not enter the canyons unless accompanied by National Park Service employee or other authorized guide.

Antelope House

