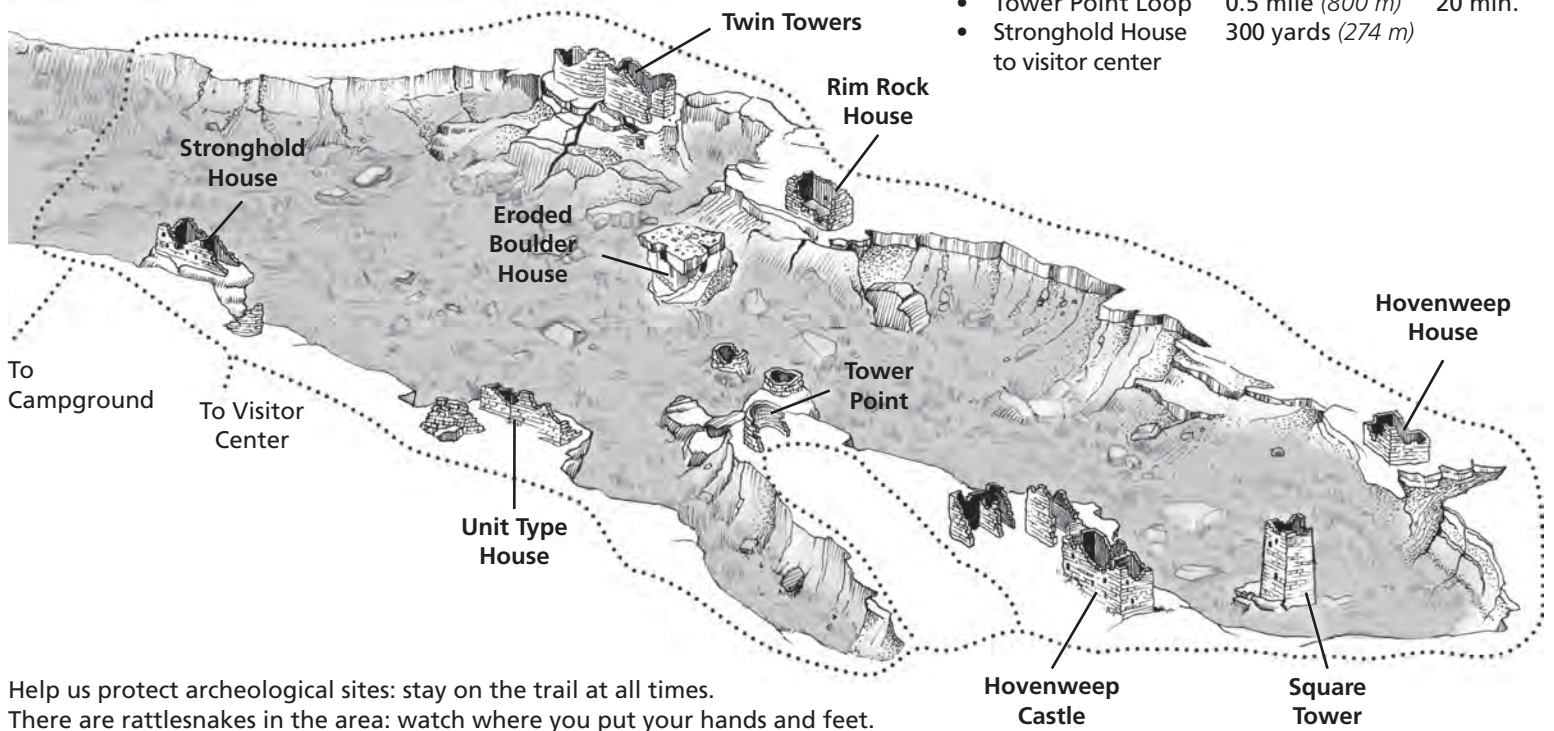




## Little Ruin Trail Guide



### Trail Distances

- Rim Trail Loop 1.5 miles (2.4 km) 1 hour
- Tower Point Loop 0.5 mile (800 m) 20 min.
- Stronghold House 300 yards (274 m) to visitor center

Help us protect archeological sites: stay on the trail at all times.  
There are rattlesnakes in the area: watch where you put your hands and feet.

### Facts & History

This rocky, rugged, open country was once home to many people. For thousands of years, people hunted animals and gathered plants, moving on an annual cycle from the high mesas to the low canyon lands. As corn, or maize, gradually made its way north from Mexico, they became farmers and settled in villages. Along with corn, they grew beans, squash, and a grain called amaranth. There is also evidence they grew cotton.

At Hovenweep, population density varied over time. In the 1200s, increasing numbers of people concentrated at the heads of small canyons, where they built pit houses, pueblos, ceremonial rooms—or *kivas*—and the towers that are Hovenweep's trademark. Most of the buildings still standing were constructed from A.D. 1230 to 1275, about the same time as the famous cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde.

The stunning Square Tower and an intriguing collection of buildings are clustered along Little Ruin Canyon. But the Square Tower community was not alone. Seven hundred years ago, a lively system of settlements flourished in the immediate area, all within a day's walk of each other.

The Square Tower group sits in the heart of a 500-square-mile raised block of land called Cajon Mesa and is part of the Great Sage Plain. Several streams drain the mesa and flow into the San Juan River to the south.

Pioneer photographer William Henry Jackson, who came here in 1874, called this place *Hovenweep*. It is a Ute/Paiute word that means "deserted valley." The fine state of preservation of the structures and their unusual architecture led to Hovenweep's designation as a national monument in 1923.

### The Square Tower Group

#### Stronghold House

Stronghold House was named for its fortress-like appearance, though it is not clear whether its architects designed it or any other structures for defense. The builders may simply have been following an aesthetic sense or responding to the challenges of the terrain. What you see is actually the upper story of a large pueblo, which now lies in rubble, built on the slope below. People entered the house by way of hand-and-toe holds chipped into the rock, or possibly by a wooden ladder. Stronghold House has two distinct sections, and the stone blocks are exceptionally well shaped. To your right is Stronghold Tower, built over a crevice in the cliff. At one time, a log bridged the crevice and supported part of the tower. The log rotted away, and most of the tower tumbled to the canyon bottom.

Eroded Boulder House is another delightful structure visible in the canyon. It incorporates the huge rock under which it sits as part of its roof and walls. On top of the boulder are a few shaped stones where a tower once perched. From an opening in the north wall of the house, Tower Point is visible.

#### Unit Type House

Unit Type House is the name archeologists gave to a basic building plan they noticed early on at sites in the Southwest. This one is a perfect example — a few living and storage rooms and one kiva — possibly home to a family or a clan. Most larger pueblos expanded by simply repeating this idea.

The single kiva here is of the Mesa Verde style. Two of the openings in the wall of the room east of the kiva were possibly used to mark summer and winter solstices, information that is extremely useful to farmers.

#### Tower Point

The most striking feature of Tower Point itself is the commanding view up and down Little Ruin Canyon. In the alcoves just below the rim, you will see rooms where people stored crops such as corn, beans, and squash. A surplus harvest was essential to the ancestral Puebloans because they had to get through the inevitable bad years when crops failed. These granaries had to be tight and secure against rodents and seeping water.

### What's in a name?

The name *Anasazi* has long been used for the prehistoric farmers of the Four Corners. The favored term is now *ancestral Puebloan*, indicating they were the ancestors of modern-day Puebloans. Many Pueblo people maintain physical and spiritual connections to these places. Please appreciate and respect them.

Imagine the life and times of the residents of Square Tower community. It was a neighborhood of farmers who, with resourcefulness and intimate knowledge of climate, soil, sunlight, and moisture succeeded in raising enough food to sustain a sizable population, perhaps 100 to 150 people. Life was good for a time. The seep at the canyon head flowed with water. There was enough corn to store away for lean times and there were small animals and wild plants to add to the menu. There was even enough time to construct the large towers that were integral to the community.

#### **Hovenweep Castle & Square Tower**

Hovenweep Castle consists of two D-shaped towers perched on the rim of Little Ruin Canyon. The stone walls, two and three courses thick, show detailed masonry techniques. Growth rings on a wooden beam in one tower indicate that the log was cut in A.D. 1277, one of the latest dates on any structure in the San Juan region. A residence was associated with the “castle,” but the people who lived here were farmers, not kings and queens.

The two-story-tall Square Tower stands down in the canyon. Situated on a large sandstone boulder, it was built in a slight spiral shape, perhaps for added strength or for aesthetics. The single T-shaped doorway faces west. There is evidence of an earlier doorway facing the spring at the head of the canyon. A kiva was excavated beside Square Tower. Unlike many tower-kiva associations elsewhere, Square Tower and its kiva were not connected by a tunnel.

The large hackberry trees growing beside the tower tell of the seep that trickles under the alcove. It was the presence of this precious permanent water source that held the Square Tower settlement together.

#### **Checkdam**

A short distance beyond Hovenweep Castle, a line of rocks spans a small streambed. This is a checkdam, built by the original early inhabitants and partly reconstructed by archeologists in 1974. We believe the dam originally stood a foot or two higher.

Hovenweep farmers built series of checkdams all over the mesa. Some dams may have slowed water in a flash flood, backed up rich pockets of soil, or enhanced the flow of springs below; others may have prevented washouts of crops planted in the canyon bottoms.

It may have required one to two acres (0.4–0.8 ha) to grow enough food for one person for a year and allow for surplus. That meant a great deal of the mesatop land must have been devoted to agriculture. To assure a good harvest, Pueblo farmers had to hedge their bets, locating fields in favorable places, staggering planting times, and employing several water-collection methods.

#### **Hovenweep House**

Hovenweep House was the center of one of the largest Pueblo villages in the Square Tower group. What still stands was built on solid sandstone bedrock. The rest has crumbled to the ground, but a closer look reveals its former size and pattern. As

with other buildings in this area, the masons took great pains with their stonework. Some boulders were pecked on the surface, a technique also seen at nearby Mesa Verde. Small, flat rocks were inserted as spalls, or chinks, in the mortar joints. The walls may have been completely covered with thick layers of clay-based plaster.

Looking back across the canyon, you have an excellent view of the southern walls of Hovenweep Castle. Spilling down the slope below are piles of rubble from other structures. Now eroded and hidden by rocks and plants, the amount of debris gives some idea of the number of people who once lived here.

Always in need of more land to cultivate, the residents placed terraced gardens on the hillsides. These gardens would have been watered by runoff from the slickrock areas above. Sheltered from the wind, and with added warmth from the surrounding rock, terrace gardens may have yielded the earliest maturing crops. Continue on the trail along the rim. Look ahead and down into the canyon for a good view of Eroded Boulder House and across to Stronghold House. In the distance to the east, the canyon frames Sleeping Ute Mountain near Cortez, Colorado.

#### **Rimrock House**

Despite its name, Rimrock House may not have been a place where people lived, for it lacks any apparent room divisions. The structure is rectangular in shape and stands two stories high. Many small openings were placed in the walls, at unusual angles. Peepholes for seeing who might be coming for a visit? Observation ports for tracking the sun? Or maybe something as simple as ventilation? Their function remains unknown. In the canyon you can see the remains of Round Tower. It is almost perfectly circular and was probably two stories tall.

#### **Twin Towers**

Together, Twin Towers had 16 rooms. Their architecture is amazing; the two buildings rise from the native bedrock, their walls almost touching. One is oval, the other horseshoe shaped. Their builders skillfully laid up thick and thin sandstone blocks. Original wooden lintels are still in place in one tower. These towers are among the most carefully constructed buildings in the entire Southwest.

A short distance ahead, the trail drops 80 feet (24 m) into the canyon. It is steeper here, and if it appears too difficult, please backtrack on the path. Should you continue down, note a deposit of soft gray material, which is weathered coal. You also pass the contact between the two major rock formations in this region. The upper layer is sandstone that forms cliffs and ledges and is the rock used in Hovenweep buildings. The lower layer is a shaly conglomerate, made up of pebbles and cobbles interspersed with layers of sandstone. Water cannot permeate the lower layer, but drains out as life-giving springs and seeps. Up the canyon at the confluence of the two arms of Little Ruin Canyon, you see large cottonwood trees, another sign that water is nearby.

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## **Protect the Past**

The unique stone towers and other buildings at Hovenweep are extremely fragile. To help preserve them, observe proper site etiquette:

- Remain on marked trails.
- Do not climb, sit, or stand on any rock walls.
- Do not touch or disturb any artifacts, including pottery sherds, arrow points, or rock art. Once removed from context, the story they can tell is gone forever.

We are pleased you have come to visit and welcome your comments and suggestions, especially how to better protect these special sites and the solitude of Hovenweep.