

Mesa Verde

National Geographic Traveler named Mesa Verde National Park as one of fifty "must see" places of a life time!

It's easy to see why. America's first World Heritage site, Mesa Verde shows a civilization's dynamic growth over 700 years.

Mesa Verde proper is split into a series of smaller mesas, like fingers spread wide on your hand. Hundreds of villages and farming areas once dotted these high semi-arid mesa tops. Later, cliff dwellings were built in canyons between narrow fingers of land. The Mesa's entire Anasazi history is captured in these renovated mesa top sites ~ from primitive underground pit house to multi-storied stone villages of inordinate beauty. Only in the last 100 years of Anasazi heritage were famous cliff dwellings built.

600 Years of Mesa Top Habitation and Farming

The mesa top at Mesa Verde was long home to Basketmaker and Pueblo Anasazi. From pit house to room block habitations, Anasazi spread across the central Mesa Verde area. Part of the reason for Mesa Verde being a World Heritage Site is the National Park Service effort in renovation.

Mesa Verde Self-Guided Tours

Pithouse

Mesa Verde contains some of our best examples of early Anasazi lifestyle.



Mesa top farmers lived in pithouses about 1400 years ago.

This pithouse example is found on Chapin Mesa along Mesa Top Loop in the Pithouses and Villages area.

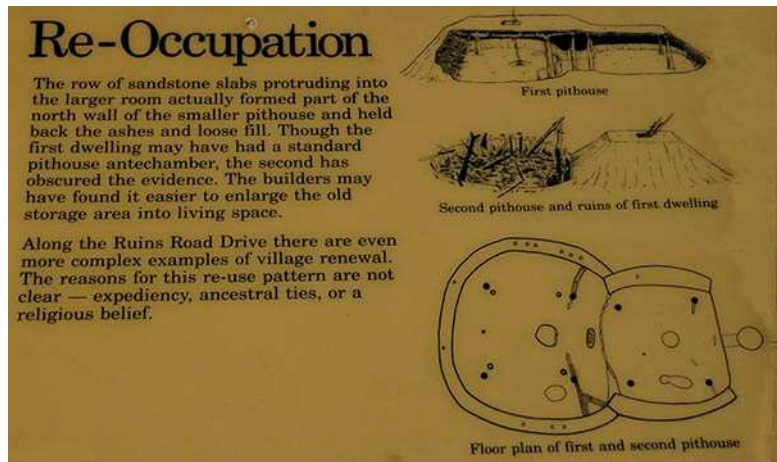
It has a fascinating history. Farming had replaced hunting and gathering as the main livelihood. The larger

area was the original pit house built during Basketmaker time between 550 and 750 AD. The pit house featured a living room sunk a few feet into the ground. Four corner timbers supported the roof. The fire pit had an air deflector. An antechamber might contain storage bins or pits. The sipapu was a hole for passage

to the underworld, from which the people had come. Pit houses, clustered in the small villages, were usually built on mesa tops but sometimes in cliff recesses.

NPS has placed signposts with stories of each area. During excavation, the larger segment of this pithouse contained charred embers and scorched adobe rubble. It appears this pithouse burned down (process is shown to the right).

With fire pit only 6 feet below the ceiling laced with sticks and timber dried by many years of cooking fires, a pithouse could be quite a hazardous place to live. Archaeologists suggest many pithouses burned down.



About 1000 years ago, people of Mesa Verde advanced to skillful stone masonry. Walls of thick, double-coursed stone often rose 2 or 3 stories high and were joined together in the units of 50 rooms or more. While pithouses had a life of perhaps 20 years, stone homes might last 50 or more years.

Far View Village

Far View (right) was one of the most densely populated parts of the mesa from 750 until 1300 AD. Nearly 50 villages occurred within a half square mile area, home to hundreds of people.

People were living at Far View at least 200 years before they began building the



more famous Mesa Verde cliff dwellings. Excavation also reveals many Anasazi chose to remain in their mesa top community well after many neighbors moved into the cliff alcoves. A subterranean kiva remained 50°F all year round. So for the Anasazi, it stayed cool in the summer, and only a small fire was needed to create winter warmth.

Mummy Lake

Mummy Lake is just above Far View Village on Chapin Mesa. It's a skillfully designed reservoir which at one time contained up to 90,000 gallons. Water was sourced five or six intense summer rainstorms rated at one to 2 inches per hour lasting five or 10 minutes. This reservoir and 3 others like it at the same latitude supplied mesa top and canyon bottom water for the ancient Anasazi. This aerial image (©1999, Breternitz) depicts Mummy Lake.



Water, an essential staple for life, was extremely precious. Mummy Lake, a.k.a. Far View Reservoir, has a companion reservoir on the next mesa to the west called Sagebrush. Two additional reservoirs have been noted in canyons to the east. All reservoirs are essentially at the same latitude and stretch across 6 miles of mesa and canyon country.

Excavation of Mummy Lake showed many potsherds from jars used to carry water to the area surrounding Far View Village. It would appear some of those jars were broken in trying to gather water.

During that dig, it was also found that in 350 years, there were 14 fires. Mesa Verde's present surface is partly a jumble of burned trunks rather than the normal piñon juniper forest. It would appear the ancient Anasazi could also incur severe fires ~ perhaps one every 25 years.



Cliff Palace

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That Last 100 Years...

Cliff Palace is an icon for final stages of our enduring Anasazi legacy and heritage!

Other Anasazi Sites

At Canyons of the Ancients or Cedar Mesa, you simply won't find a similar level of effort to restore ruins. Naturally, it's Mesa Verde's ruin restoration or

preservation that gives you the superb sense of Anasazi architecture and life through time. Yes, we could trek to Cedar Mesa searching for Basketmaker mesa top ruins. Unfortunately, it's a natural, unrestored habitat; ruins would be hard to locate. If you could find them in the piñon juniper forest, they would be tumbled down and relatively disappointing on such a broad, comparative scale. Yet, the free sense of pristine nature for Pueblo III Moon House at Cedar Mesa frees your spirit and helps you *sense* how the Anasazi actually lived.

At Mesa Verde, we normally have a very set format for photography ~ ranger-guided tours. Only on self-guided tours, such as Far View and pithouses on Mesa Top Loop, will you be able to photograph when the light is right.

Although NPS says eight o'clock for closing, there's a tendency to ask you to depart before that.

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