

Travel: This Week



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Piece of an ages-old puzzle

N.M. ruins offer clues in disappearance of pueblo people

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By **ANNE Z. COOKE** and **STEVE HAGGERTY** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning Newss

AZTEC, N.M. – "Bet that's a fake," I said, when we turned a corner and spotted a sign for "Aztec Ruins."

Rock formations, maybe, or a theme park, but not an archaeological site. And the Aztecs lived in old Mexico, not New Mexico.

But we were ahead of schedule on our drive across northern New Mexico and the July morning felt cool and fresh. Stopping to stretch our legs was serendipitous. And there was a simple explanation for our mix-up.

Aztec Ruins National Monument, misnamed by early settlers, is a gem of a park. On 320 acres near the Animas River, it contains a half-dozen structures built and inhabited between 1000 and 1250 by the Anasazi, whom some now call Pueblos.

Though most of the ruins are unexcavated, the West Ruins site, behind the visitor's center, is fully excavated and stabilized (not restored). The largest structure in the monument, it's an all-in-one village with 400 tiny rooms in three sides facing an open plaza and the south.

"On purpose, for warmth," said Gary Brown, the park's chief archaeologist, who was in the center when we arrived at 9 a.m. "It was the solar technology of the time. You'll see what I mean when you walk through."

Though Aztec Ruins is smaller than nearby Chaco Canyon, a similar village of the period, and Mesa Verde, 35 miles north, Aztec Ruins rivals both for elegant design and quality craftsmanship. But it has other, more prosaic qualities.

The monument is rarely crowded, attracting only 45,000 visitors annually. And you can tour all of the West Ruins in an hour, without a guide, a bonus if you hate to be herded into groups, as now is the case at Mesa Verde. Here you can pick up a trail guide for \$1.50 and follow the numbered locations.

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I wish we'd had more time to wander among rooms. It's a puzzle, guessing how the builders carried so much sandstone from a quarry several miles away, why the windows were so tiny and how people got into rooms without doors. The West Ruin, completely walled in, felt like a fortress. Was security an issue? Yet other evidence – building styles and a network of roads – suggests the Four Corners people moved from one pueblo to another.

In the end, I had more questions for ranger-naturalist Marti Stebbins than would fit in an hour, or that she could answer definitively. As she pointed out, there are so many ruins inside and near Aztec Ruins monument, many of them still unexcavated, that the study of the former residents is a work in progress.

Though I'd rather imagine people living here, experts think the West Ruins, constructed of sandstone blocks, was primarily a public structure, used for gatherings and ceremonies. The eight perfectly round small kivas and the large Great Kiva are an unusual number for a purely residential dwelling.

The latter kiva was uncovered in 1921 by archaeologist Earl H. Morris, who led the first ongoing, scientific dig for New York's American Museum of Natural History.

With the trail guide in hand, we followed the path, partially paved, along the west wall and through small ground-floor rooms in the north side. The small doorways between them, knocked out during the 1880s by looters searching for pottery, were left to allow access.

Without them, you would have used a ladder to climb down into these rooms from the room above. Since the only windows were small slits in the upper walls, these north-side rooms were dim and dark. Archaeologists who found broken pottery, cloth fragments, worn tools and worn sandals believe they were storage areas.

With the top floor gone and the inner walls exposed, you can see how the beams were placed. In one of the rooms, "Stop 9," in the trail guide, Mr. Morris found a dozen skeletons wrapped for burial, attended by beads and pottery offerings. The rooms at Stops 10, 11 and 12 revealed changing uses during several centuries: burial chambers, workshops, toilets and storage.

Stops 19 and 20 are inside the Great Kiva, now enclosed and with an entrance for visitors. Here, Mr. Morris' excavations showed that four massive pillars supported a 95-ton roof. Each pillar stood on a shaped limestone base weighing about 355 pounds, carried somehow – without wheels or horses – 40 miles from the nearest mountains.

At the last stop on our walk, No. 22, the trail guide posed a question as relevant today as it was in the 1300s, when suddenly, without apparent reason, all the residents in the Four Corners abandoned their villages.

Think about the availability of natural resources, says the guide. "After 200 years in one place, how productive could their fields be? How much farther did they have to travel to gather firewood, collect building materials and hunt game?"

The former residents probably moved east to open land in Arizona and the Rio Grande Valley.

It left us wondering where we might go if we ever use up our natural resources.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are freelance writers in California.

WHEN YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Aztec Ruins is in northwest New Mexico, seven miles north of Bloomfield, on U.S. Highway 64, and 35 miles south of Durango, Colo. Contact: 505-334-6174; www.nps.gov/azru.

TICKETS

Admission is \$4 for adults and free for senior citizens and ages 16 and younger.

TOURING

Start your tour at the recently remodeled visitor's center. Exhibits show artifacts found during excavation, and rangers can answer questions. A shop sells postcards, books and maps. A parking lot and restrooms are adjacent.



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