



Visitor Guide



The standing architecture of Hovenweep was built approximately 800 years ago by ancestors of today's Pueblo people.

Facts & History

Hovenweep National Monument was established on March 2, 1923 by President Warren G. Harding. It protects five prehistoric ancestral Pueblo canyon head villages located along a 16 mile stretch of land intersecting the Utah-Colorado border west of Cortez, CO.

The Square Tower Unit is the largest section of the monument and contains the most extensive archeological remains as well as the visitor center and a 31 site campground. It is important that you come to the visitor center first for an orientation to the monument and assistance in planning your visit. All of the state highways and county roads leading to the Square Tower Unit from Cortez, CO, and Blanding or Bluff, UT are paved.

In addition to the Square Tower Unit there are the 'outlying' units which include Holly, Horseshoe, Hackberry, Cutthroat Castle and Cajon. The Holly, Horseshoe and Hackberry Units are located about four miles northeast of Square Tower. The Cutthroat Castle Unit is about eight miles northeast of Square Tower and Cajon is about nine miles southwest. Significant portions (1 to 2 miles) of the roads leading to these outlying units are unmaintained dirt and gravel; higher clearance vehicles are recommended for visiting these sites.

The widest variety of hiking opportunities is located at the Square Tower Unit. Here a self-guiding two mile loop trail will take you entirely around the monument's largest archeological site and provide both panoramic and close-up views of its canyon and well preserved structures. Shorter hikes are also possible at Square Tower including an accessible 300 yard sidewalk to a viewpoint overlooking a large portion of the canyon. There are also short hikes at each outlying site ranging from .25 to 1.6 miles round-trip. The longest hike is a four mile trail (eight miles round-trip) that connects the Square Tower Unit with the Holly Unit, providing a longer scenic backcountry hike.

Hovenweep National Monument and its outlying sites are located on a portion of the Great Sage Plain known as Cajon Mesa. This region is defined by deep, wide canyons fed by shallower tributary drainages. Cajon Mesa tilts slightly to the south causing the ephemeral runoff from its canyons to eventually flow into the San Juan River. Aside from rolling expanses of sagebrush,

Cajon Mesa's plant communities include piñon-juniper woodlands in the higher elevations to the north and desert shrublands to the south.

Human presence on Cajon Mesa can be traced back as far back as 6,000 – 8,000 BC. Nomadic hunter-gatherers would pass through on their seasonal rounds, camping near the springs located at the heads of some canyons. Eventually people leading more sedentary, agricultural lifestyles began settling the region around AD 200. Cajon Mesa remained relatively uninhabited until approximately AD 900. Then, as the region's population grew and more land was needed for agriculture, small homesites developed across the more open southern expanses of the mesa.

For reasons not completely understood, in the late 1100s and early 1200s these more widely dispersed habitations began consolidating into communities around the water sources located at or near canyon heads. This 'aggregation' appears to intensify with the onset of an increasingly arid period that culminated with a prolonged severe drought beginning in the 1270s.

The structural remains at Hovenweep represent some of the best preserved examples of these ancestral Pueblo canyon head communities in existence. Tree ring dating indicates most of these structures were built in the mid-1200s beginning in the 1230s and ending in the late 1270s.

By A.D. 1300 the Pueblo people throughout the Four Corners region had departed, emigrating primarily to central Arizona and the Rio Grande valley in New Mexico. Their abandoned communities at Hovenweep stood relatively undisturbed for centuries until discovered by a Mormon expedition in the mid 1850s. The Hopi, Zuni and Rio Grande Pueblo tribes are now considered the modern-day descendants of the ancestral people who created these memorable structures centuries ago.

The land surrounding Hovenweep is held by the Navajo Nation, Bureau of Land Management, State of Utah, and private landowners. Respect the regulations and property rights of these agencies and individuals when travelling in the area.



The masonry found at Hovenweep is very distinctive and shows considerable skill in construction techniques.

Protect the Past for the Future

Your help is needed to preserve Hovenweep National Monument. Here are several things you can do that will protect Hovenweep for future generations:

- Stay on designated trails at all times and be careful where you step. Walking off-trail damages the biological soil crust which is a vital for erosion control and plant nutrition. It can take decades for the crust to repair itself.
- Areas behind chain barriers are closed to protect fragile archaeological sites, soil and vegetation. Do not cross these barriers.
- Pets are allowed in the monument and on trails, but must be leashed (6' max.) at all times.
- Eat at picnic areas or the campground only and do not feed wildlife. Store food securely and throw all trash in receptacles provided. Offering food or leaving it unattended can attract animals and insects to places they do not belong.
- Take photographs; do not take artifacts, no matter how small. Any person who excavates, removes, damages, alters, or defaces archeological resources on federal land is subject to fine and/or arrest.

Protect Yourself

- Bring enough water for yourself and your pet(s).
- Wear sunscreen and hat; rest often.
- Respect the plants and wildlife - some species can be harmful.

Map

