In the pursuit of landscape photography within the American Southwest, one inevitably comes upon the ancient architecture of the Ancestral Puebloans. Hidden among the cliffs and canyons, often tucked into sandstone alcoves, their dwellings and rock art leave a rich legacy of humans integrating with this land for thousands of years. As photographers, these prehistoric sites ask us to understand the geometry of shapes and converging lines, the connection of earth and sky, and the resonating power of place. The ancient buildings rise from the sandstone landscape with the imperceptible transition of geology to masonry bricks standing against the sky. Rock art embellishes natural formations, leaving narratives lost in the wind. These sites portray the human struggle to find harmony with nature, a rich story to ponder in our modern times.

Navajo National Monument, Arizona
Two of the most pristine ancient dwellings you’ll ever find are Betatakin and Keet Seel. It appears as if the original residents departed only yesterday. These are also two of the more challenging sites to visit.

Betatakin is a sprawling village across a round cave under tall sandstone cliffs. To photograph it up close, you must take the three- to five-mile, round-trip, ranger-led tours, which start at an elevation of 7,300 feet, with a 700-foot elevation change. The trail ends just beyond a small aspen grove at the canyon bottom, directly below the dwellings. Above, centuries-old walls stand solid, with thin wooden ladders leading to rooftops. You’ll also see petroglyphs and pictographs near the alcove.

A less strenuous way to photograph Betatakin, although from quite a distance, is from the Sandal Trail. At the visitor center, follow the paved walkway, a one-mile round-trip, to the overlook.

Keet Seel is best photographed on an overnight backpack trip. The 17-mile round-trip is a commitment of both planning and physical endurance. Upon arrival, a backcountry ranger will be waiting to guide you up a vertigo-inducing, 70-foot ladder into the 160-room dwelling. Note that no tripods are allowed. Explore the street of gracefully offset, multistoried structures, and before you leave, find the two large, ancient pots sitting up on a wall—proof that this site is seemingly forgotten by time.

Travel Details: No entrance fee. Two free campgrounds. Sites open from Memorial Day weekend in May to Labor Day weekend in September each year. Betatakin tours are free, offered twice each morning. Keet Seel requires advance reservations and a backcountry permit. Park info: nps.gov/nava. Navajo National Monument is located at the end of AZ State Route 564; exit from U.S. Highway 160 about 21 miles southwest of Kayenta, Arizona. Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park is about an hour away.
The ancient ones to foretell an upcoming equinox or solstice. At the castle, take the half-mile spur trail out to Tower Point. An eroding round tower sits alone, with an all-encompassing view of the canyon, a perfect golden-hour composition. Sleeping Ute Mountain spreads across the distant horizon, the snow-covered peaks catching last light.

Hovenweep was designated an International Dark Sky Park in 2014. When darkness descends and a canopy of stars and distant planets begins to emerge, you’ll know why. Although the trail closes at dark, the park service schedules periodic night sky photography hikes to the castle.

There are several other sites with towers and dwellings to visit in outlying units of the monument. Paved roads lead to the visitor center, but you must take dirt roads to the Holly, Horseshoe, Hackberry, Cutthroat Castle and Cajon units.

TRAVEL DETAILS: No entrance fee. Trails open sunrise-sunset. Campground has 31 sites; fee required. Park service warns visitors not to rely on GPS for driving directions; instead, use the directions on their website, nps.gov/hove. Nearby ancient sites include Mesa Verde National Park, Canyons of the Ancients National Monument and Natural Bridges National Monument.

Canyonlands National Park, Utah

Deep in Horseshoe Canyon, the Great Gallery rock art site is a mysterious place. Tall and otherworldly beings stare blankly from a pastel sandstone cliff. These Barrier Canyon-style pictographs have a haunting and powerful presence with their life-sized proportions.

Photographing the glyphs after they fall into midafternoon shade is best. The moment that the direct sunlight disappears from the cliff face is an ideal time. When the light still illuminates the rock shelf below, a subtle golden glow appears from the upward-reflecting light. Through a telephoto lens, a few of the deep red pictographs show detailed embellishments using white and turquoise pigments, and hidden patterns incised into the stone.

TRAVEL DETAILS: Entrance fee required. Camping is available at six campgrounds; fees vary. From Vernal, Utah, take U.S. Highway 40 east to Utah Highway 149 and go north to the monument visitor center. Park info: nps.gov/dino. Additional rock art sites in northeastern Utah include Dry Fork Canyon, Nine Mile Canyon, Sego Canyon and Buckhorn Canyon.

Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado

Cliff Palace, the largest and most recognizable of the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, can easily be photographed from the nearby overlook. Arrive before twilight and you can capture the site, after the last tour, empty of visitors. Yet, most photographers want to visit the dwellings up close. Here lies the challenge: getting shots without tourists milling about during the daytime group tours. The park service responded to this issue, and offers Cliff Palace Photography Tours. These twice-weekly, 90-minute tours are limited to 10 people. They start in the late afternoon, good for rich colors, and tripods are allowed.
The two other sites that require ranger-guided tours are Long House, a 2.5-hour tour, and Balcony House. Preplan for a mid-morning tour at Balcony House. Photographers are on their own to most places like the overlook of Square Tower House, best viewed from the mesa-top Far View House. Spruce Tree House has self-guided tours March to early November and ranger-guided tours in the winter to view the site from outside, but close enough for excellent photos.

The paved trail to Spruce Tree House begins from the Chapin Mesa Archeological [sic] Museum. The half-mile round-trip twists and curves 100 feet of elevation into the wooded canyon. It’s the third-largest cliff dwelling in the park, and one of the best preserved.

In front of the multi-story rooms, tall ladders extend up from kivas, the underground ceremonial chambers, giving a sense of depth to photos. One of the site’s kivas is open to the public. An image from inside the ladder is a classic perspective. Of the site’s kivas is open to the public. An image curves 100 feet of elevation into the wooded canyon. It’s the third-largest cliff dwelling in the park, and one of the best preserved.

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