



*Hovenweep Castle, Hovenweep National Monument, Utah*

# ANCIENT SOUTHWEST

Exploring the dwellings and rock art of the Ancestral Puebloans

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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](https://www.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.



**Keet Seel Ruin, Navajo National Monument, Arizona**

### Hovenweep National Monument, Colorado and Utah

What you'll notice after arriving is an immense silence blanketing the landscape. On the Great Sage Plain halfway between Cortez, Colorado, and Bluff, Utah, the monument is literally in the middle of nowhere. Archaeologists aren't certain about their motivation, but the ancient architects here chose the engineering challenge of constructing buildings atop boulders, including several multistory round and square towers.

From the visitor center, the Little Ruin Trail circles the nearby canyon on a mile-and-a-half loop dotted with captivating prehistoric dwellings and towers built between AD 1200 and 1300.

At the head of the canyon, a two-story square tower built on a boulder on the canyon floor overlooks a nearby spring. Hovenweep Castle sits perched on the canyon rim above. Miniature windows in the castle walls capture seasonal differences in sunbeams used by

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 rich 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](https://www.nps.gov/hove). Nearby ancient sites include Mesa Verde National Park, Canyons of the Ancients National Monument and Natural Bridges Natural 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.

The journey to the Great Gallery is part of the experience. The daylong excursion leaves the pavement between the towns of Green River and Hanksville, where you take 30 miles of slow, dirt roads before reaching the cliff-top trailhead. The trail quickly descends 780 feet of elevation on switchbacks in the canyon wall.

There are several panels of rock art to visit along the canyon bottom so expect the hike to take between 4 and 6 hours, but all the effort will be worth it after you witness this premier rock art panel. **TRAVEL DETAILS:** No fee required. Groups of 20 or more must go in with a ranger. Primitive camping allowed at the trailhead; no drinking water, but a vault toilet is available. Park info and road conditions: [nps.gov/cany](https://www.nps.gov/cany). Nearby site with ancient dwellings and rock art is Natural Bridges National Monument.

### Dinosaur National Monument, Colorado and Utah

As the name implies, this monument showcases dinosaurs with a quarry of stone-embedded fossils, including several Stegosaurus skeletons. The unexpected treasure is the rock art to be found in the park. There are five easy-to-find rock art sites, all with unique offerings. A particularly intriguing petroglyph panel is the remote McKee Springs site. Near many other fine renderings is a large humanlike figure holding a spiral shield with peculiar little anthropomorphic figures floating on both sides. The panel is at the base of a cliff up a relatively short trail. Ask about the condition of the dirt road before venturing out, and protect any site you visit by not touching the rock art.

The best time for this site is near the end of the golden hour and into dusk. As with many petroglyph sites, an oblique angle with a wide-angle lens will give the image a sense of scale and place. By staying after dark, you can experiment with light painting. Use a flashlight, and during a long exposure, carefully trace the lines of the petroglyph until the entire design is illuminated. This technique creates an interesting, otherworldly glow effect.

**TRAVEL DETAILS:** Entrance fee



**Great Gallery, Canyonlands National Park, Utah**



**McKee Springs, Dinosaur National Monument, Utah**

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](https://www.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.



**Spruce Tree House, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado**

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. Soft, reflected light from a nearby canyon wall adds a handsome glow to the 40-room dwelling. Considered an “adventurous tour” means it’s not for everyone. Access is up a 32-foot-tall ladder. Further along includes crawling through an 18-inch-wide, 12-foot-long tunnel, and up two 10-foot ladders.

Photographers are on their own to most places like the overlook of Square Tower House, best timed to the dynamic golden hour, and through 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 multistory 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 with the ladder is a classic perspective.

**TRAVEL DETAILS:** Entrance and tour fees



**Three Rivers Petroglyph Site, New Mexico**

required. Open year-round, weather permitting, except Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year’s Day. Camping available May to October. Cliff Palace photography tours with advance ticket purchase at **recreation.gov**. Located on Highway 160 between Cortez and Durango, Colorado. Park info: **nps.gov/meve**.

**NOTE:** On Wednesday, December 9, 2015, lanterns will light Cliff Palace after dark to celebrate the National Park Service Centennial year. Photographers will be allowed to photograph from Sun Temple Overlook; the view is from across a small canyon. No one will be allowed into the site. The following day, on Thursday, December 10, 2015, there will be a Luminaria Holiday Open House. From 4:00 to 9:00 p.m., the trail to Spruce Tree House is lined with

A one-mile round-trip trail is a good introduction to one of the largest, and most accessible, rock art sites in the Southwest. The rich concentration of detailed rock art appears high contrast and distinct in almost any light, including moonlight, but subdued lighting works best—a good rule to showcase any form of rock art. Be on the trail before sunrise when the site is quiet, the summer temperatures are most tolerable and the predawn western horizon glows with an ethereal pink and blue.

Cross-country travel is allowed within the park’s 50 acres. Some of the most intriguing designs are well beyond the park trail. Scattered further along the north-south ridge are numerous and artistically rendered animals, bear paw prints, cosmic patterns, symbols and a few large, curious human faces.



**Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Culture National Historical Park, New Mexico**

luminarias, and lanterns hidden inside the dwelling will make you imagine torches and cooking fires are glowing throughout the alcove. Whether you stay on the rim or hike down the trail, you’ll get enchanting images.

### **Three Rivers Petroglyph Site, New Mexico**

Hidden in the southern New Mexico region of the Chihuahuan Desert, this ridgetop site is dedicated to over 21,000 petroglyphs. The pecked designs visually pop from dark, patina-covered boulders, the work of the Jornada Mogollon culture between AD 900 and 1400.

When sunset approaches the Tularosa Basin, the Sierra Blanca range lights up in amber, with violet shadows making a handsome background for the glyphs in this stark desert landscape.

**TRAVEL DETAILS:** Entrance fee required, managed by the BLM, open year-round. Campground (9 sites) has drinking water, bathrooms, picnic shelters, tent sites and RV hookups. Located on Highway 54 between Carrizozo and Tularosa, New Mexico. Park info: **blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/recreation/las\_cruces/three\_rivers.html**. Nearby sites of interest are Salinas and White Sands national monuments.

### **Chaco Culture National Historical Park, New Mexico**

Renowned as a premier pre-Columbian site, Pueblo Bonito is the largest ancient single structure built north of Mexico. It covers almost three acres, with more than 600 rooms, and once stood at least four stories tall.

A self-guided pathway through the site provides excellent perspectives of the architecture and intricate rock work. In late afternoon, take the Pueblo Alto Trail for an elevated overview. The signed trail starts northwest of the dwelling, and climbs 270 feet in elevation before crossing a broad shelf to the overlook. Allow time on this 2-mile round-trip for a safe, unhurried return. The gated Canyon Loop Drive closes at sunset.

The gate opens again at 7:00 a.m. Pueblo Bonito has many roofless rooms, and sunrise creates phenomenal light inside the dwelling. A few engaging images of receding interior doorways are found by starting the interpretive trail in reverse. Look on the map for the exit point and enter there. Just inside, a T-shaped doorway frames more doorways. Around the corner is another view of several doorways. Late September to mid-February is ideal for these photos, when the road opens around sunrise.

Across the canyon, Casa Rinconada is a 64-foot-wide ceremonial kiva, the largest excavated kiva in the Southwest. Consider bracketing a series of exposures for an HDR image to preserve details in the shadows of the subterranean chamber, as well as capture the bright New Mexican sky. A unique opportunity is to attend a guided sunrise walk to the kiva (reservations required) held on the spring or fall equinox and the summer solstice.

**TRAVEL DETAILS:** Entrance fee required. Open year-round except Thanksgiving, Christmas Day and New Year’s Day. Drinking water, no food services, camping by reservation only at **recreation.gov**. Located south of Farmington and north of Grants, New Mexico, with a choice of approaches. Park info: **nps.gov/chcu**. Nearby site of interest is Aztec Ruins National Monument. OP

*Professional travel and nature photographer Larry Lindahl’s latest book is The Ancient Southwest: A Guide to Archaeological Sites (Rio Nuevo Publishers). See more of his work, buy his books and sign up for his workshops at larrylindahl.com.*