

Lowry Pueblo Site Guide

Lowry Pueblo is one of the most important sites in the Mesa Verde area, but the brochure prepared on behalf of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is written for visitors with little prior knowledge. A more complete story is presented in *The Anasazi Guide* and this site guide compliments the text with stop-by-stop descriptions.

Lowry Pueblo is one of three hardened sites within Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. “Hardened” means that the Pueblo has been prepared for visitation, and a well-developed path takes you around the structure and adds a stop at a unique great kiva.

Getting There

Begin your visit at the Anasazi Heritage Center in Dolores, Colorado. The Center serves as the Monument headquarters and houses a superb museum. Center staff can provide maps, directions, information about current road conditions, and a copy of the BLM brochure.

If you choose to bypass the Anasazi Heritage Center you can pick up a copy of the BLM brochure at the site. Here’s how to get there:

1. From Cortez, Colorado, drive north on Highway 491 (formerly Highway 666).
2. As you enter Pleasant View, about 20 miles from Cortez, turn left (west) on County Road CC.
3. Relatively small, white on brown signs are posted at critical spots along your route. About 9 miles from Pleasant View, a BLM sign directs you to turn left (south) on a dirt road that takes you to the parking area.

Picnic tables and pit toilets are available at the site, but overnight camping is not permitted.

By the way, the final three miles of County Road CC are gravel. Don’t panic when the pavement ends, but drive cautiously and avoid visiting shortly after severe thunderstorms.

Significance of Lowry Pueblo

The area surrounding Lowry Pueblo had been heavily occupied by local peoples (the Northern San Juan Anasazi) for nearly 500 years before construction at Lowry started. Significantly, the builders departed from local traditions in several ways and Lowry is classified as a Chacoan Outlier. In other words, people from Chaco Canyon built Lowry Pueblo in the heart of an area already occupied by people with a unique cultural tradition.¹ Subsequent generations of local people expanded and remodeled Lowry, and it appears that Chacoan influence waned over the life of the community. We don’t know why and some archeologists believe that the Chacoans may have adopted local styles after Chaco collapsed. Others believed that the Chacoans were assimilated by the local people or moved on to other sites.

¹ For more on the issue of cultural traditions and the construction of outliers, see “What is a Chacoan Great House or Outlier,” also on this web page.

It is worth noting that Lowry is one of several Chacoan outliers in the area. Escalante at the Anasazi Heritage Center is the most easily visited and its design is a near match to the original structure at the heart of Lowry Pueblo. Many outliers were built at about the same time (just 50 years before agriculture failed at Chaco) and I believe their construction presaged the abandonment of Chaco Canyon. My guess is that the Chacoans began expanding as their society reached its zenith and the outliers provided core settlements to which much of the population moved as they evacuated Chaco.

Excavations at Lowry began with trenching in 1928, and Paul Martin from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago excavated here through the early 1930s. Artifacts gathered during his excavations are housed at the Field Museum and the collection includes projectile points, ground stone objects, polishing stones, effigies, worked sherds, pipes, awls, antlers, and bowls in addition to sherds and other broken pieces. Images of many along with pictures of Martin at work and a searchable database are available online at

http://www.fieldmuseum.org/research_collections/anthropology/anthro_sites/paul_martin/martin_web/image17.html.

Stop by Stop Guide

A footpath leads from the parking lot to the Pueblo and your first landmark is a BLM sign announcing that Lowry is a National Historic Landmark. The site map will help you get your bearings.

When you are oriented, continue up the trail toward the structure.

Your next landmark is a three-way intersection in the trail. This is a nice vantage point and a good location for photographs showing the whole Pueblo. Rubble removed during excavation suggests that the structure originally stood two stories tall, and it may have reached three stories on the left, south end. Much of what you see today is the remains of the second floor and lower components have been reburied to protect them.

Notice the modern roof at the left, south, end of the structure. This roof protects some of the oldest, most substantial areas of the pueblo including a painted kiva. Here, you can also see how different types of construction survived centuries of abandonment. Chacoan masonry on the south is characterized by carefully shaped stones and small areas of exposed mortar. It remained largely intact even after the roof collapsed. In contrast, the wing extending to the right, north, was built with larger, less uniform stones and bigger areas of exposed mortar. Once the roof collapsed, water easily penetrated the exposed mortar and the structure eroded fairly quickly.

When you are done contemplating the structure, turn right at the intersection. Following the trail, you will walk around the structure in a counter clockwise direction. There are no numbered markers, but we will use the BLM interpretive signs as our reference points.

Footprints

The first sign you encounter is titled “Footprints,” and describes the Great Sage Plane on which you are standing. This is a good spot to contemplate the landscape around you. Today, the gentle rolling hillsides and fertile mesas are covered with a mixture of shrubs

and small trees. All this greenery is modern growth and the scene would have looked far different during the heyday of Lowry Pueblo.

Most trees were used as timbers in building the pueblo while smaller shrubs quickly disappeared into cooking and warming fires. In their place, the Anasazi created fields and gardens growing their principal crops: corn, squash, and beans. Had you visited then, you would have been treated to an ever changing view: vibrant greens during the growing season, golden browns as harvest time approached, and reddish brown earth dotted with field markers and irrigation channels after the harvest.

You would also have seen a number of nearby structures. Lowry was the heart of a substantial community and surrounding mesas sported pueblos, kivas, towers, and field houses. Visible reminders of the connection to Chaco included roads and shrines as well as small, circular stone structures thought to have been signaling stations. Remnants of these structures are hidden beneath the brush and I recommend against exploring them. None have been stabilized for visitation and there is little to see aside from scattered stones and occasional standing walls. Remember, this is rattlesnake country and you are pretty much on your own if you encounter difficulties.

The trail continues along the west side of the Pueblo and you won't see another sign until you reach the south end. As you walk, notice that there are no windows or doors in the exterior wall. The west side is literally the "back" of the pueblo and there were no openings along this side. Archeologists found a rubbish dump, or "midden," near the southwest corner of the pueblo and it is probable that the people did little more than dispose of trash along this side of the structure.

As you walk, look closely along the base of both interior and exterior walls. You may see the ends of beams protruding from the wall at or just above ground level. The number showing depends on recent rain fall and erosion, but they represent the remains of the first floor ceiling. On the trail, you are actually walking along the second floor of the structure. Archeologists and stabilization crews have backfilled the first floor to preserve it.

Notice that while the exterior wall is solid, several doorways and ventilator openings are visible in the interior walls. The original occupants entered the structure from the other side and the doorways provided access to rooms along the back while the smaller openings allowed air to circulate in the otherwise enclosed rooms.

What Did It Look Like

The next sign you encounter describes the exterior appearance of the Pueblo. As we've already noted, the structure probably stood two stories tall with a flat roof on which people carried out routine activities during favorable weather. One thing may surprise you.

Today we marvel at the carefully shaped stones and uniform masonry courses. These features would have been invisible to the original occupants because the whole structure was covered with a smooth layer of adobe plaster. Replenished every season, the external plaster prevented moisture from entering the joints and protected the underlying structure.

Construction, Expansion

Archeological evidence indicates that Lowry was expanded and remodeled several times over its lifetime. The sign here describes the major construction episodes, beginning with the original Chacoan structure followed by additions and renovations in the style of the local masons. You may recognize several features that alert archeologists to changes in the structure.

The most noticeable feature along the southern end is the addition of several rooms at the southeastern corner. These rooms stand out as departures from the original design and you may also notice that new walls were built across older walls at lower levels. Other clues include sealed windows and doors as well as changes in the masonry style and walls that abut other walls without being tied into them. Untangling the construction history is often agonizing work, but the process tells us a great deal about the development and growth of the community. And, tree ring dates from beams incorporated into the structure make it possible to determine when each of the construction episodes took place.

The Best Rooms in Town

As you round the southeastern corner, the next sign explains that kivas, circular rooms, within the core of the structure were among the most comfortable. The surrounding rooms provided insulation and protected the occupants from climate extremes in winter and summer. The sign correctly notes that Kivas were multipurpose rooms. Some people have suggested that kivas were used exclusively for ceremonies, but we now know that they were among the most active rooms in the pueblo. When necessary, they were cleaned up and used for special occasions, but they also provided comfortable areas for cooking, weaving, stone napping, chatting, and all of the other activities that sustained the population. I think of them as akin to family rooms and Hopi friends have confirmed my impression.

There is an entry into the heart of the pueblo on your right as you read the sign. Before you enter, take a moment to read the next sign, just a few feet past the entry.

Painted Kivas

The painted kiva in the interior of the structure is one of the most striking features of Lowry Pueblo. The mural was largely intact when the pueblo was first excavated, but exposure has taken its toll and the remnants have been moved to the Anasazi Heritage Center for display and preservation.

Now step back in time and enter the doorway you just passed. Watch your head and keep well clear of the metal gate during lightening. You are standing on an earthen platform created during stabilization. Originally, the kiva was a perfectly circular chamber entered from the top. The remaining walls have been restored a couple times, but the placement of wooden beams within niches is authentic. To us, they look like ladders but they literally go no place, stopping at the beams that originally formed the ceiling of the chamber. They may well have been racks from which items of symbolic significance were hung, but your guess is as good as mine.

With a sharp eye, you can see remnants of the original plaster and excavators found at least 25 intact layers when they opened the kiva. Two distinct designs were present and their meaning remains enigmatic. Contemporary pueblo people, the descendants of the Anasazi, have cultural traditions that may explain the significance of the designs. Unfortunately, they have chosen to share little of the meaning with outsiders and it is up to us to interpret them. In this regard, the murals in kivas are as mysterious and the rock art found at many sites.

J. J. Brody, an art historian at the University of New Mexico, has argued that the murals are part of an integrated artistic tradition. He notes that painted designs in kivas, on fragile wooden and ceramic objects as well as on textiles and on rock faces near Anasazi sites often use the same elements. And, he explains, the images often use the same motifs, arrangements of the elements. This suggests that the drawings have real significance and are not mere artistic doodles. Beyond that, determining what the designs mean is an open question.

Turn left as you exit the structure and follow trail back to three-way intersection. You won't encounter another sign for a while, but there is plenty to see as you walk. Restoration and preservation have obscured some elements of the masonry, but a couple openings remain. You are on the "front" side of the pueblo and each of the openings leads to a suite of rooms. Notice that the back rooms connect only with those in front and that there are no side to side openings between the back rooms. This is consistent with the pattern found in other pueblos and tells us a little about the way occupants used the structure. In general, residents lived in the front room of each suite while back rooms were used for storage. How do we know that? Hearths or fire pits are found only in the front rooms as are most artifacts.

After you have explored the room suites, continue down the trail until you return to the three-way intersection. Turn right, and follow the trail down to great kiva

Life Outside

The first sign you encounter along the trail explains that many activities took place outside, as long as weather permitted. The plaza in front and the roof of the Pueblo were busy places during temperate seasons. The techniques available to Martin in the 1930s didn't allow him to recover data in the plaza, but more recent excavations elsewhere disclosed a number of features that were probably present at Lowry.

A typical courtyard was tamped earth and some areas were paved with adobe plaster. Low walls divided part of the space into cooking, processing, and working areas, many of which were shaded by brush roofs set on poles. On a typical spring day, residents who were not working the fields would have filled the area. Young children probably buzzed from area to area, playing games or simply observing. Aged members of the community kept an eye on the children while engaging in conversations and monitoring other activities. Adults cleaned game, ground corn, shaped stone tools, formed ceramics, and filled their hours with other tasks. Some ethnographic studies suggest that the plaza was filled with sound as adults sang to entertain themselves and maintain the rhythm of their work.

On warmer days, similar activities probably took place on rooftops where gentle breezes provided natural air conditioning.

Continue down the gently sloping trail to the great kiva, located on a level area about 20 feet below the pueblo.

The Great Kiva

As you probably know, isolated great kivas such as this one were gathering places for members of the entire community. Residents of Lowry Pueblo conducted ceremonies here along with residents in the surrounding villages and pueblos.

On the left, north, rim of the kiva stand the remains of a three-room antechamber. Archeologists believe participants or priests used these rooms to store ceremonial articles and they may also have been used as dressing rooms where participants changed into costumes. There is a small cut in the rim that looks like an entry, but it is so small that most participants probably entered through an opening in the ceiling.

On the floor, notice that common features including floor drums and roof support foundations were transformed into figures representing the Summer and Winter people.² This is the only Anasazi kiva where I have seen this modification and archeologists believe the figures were created during the final remodeling of the kiva, shortly before the area was abandoned. If this speculation is correct, these figures may be a tangible reminder that religious beliefs were changing rapidly as turmoil engulfed the civilization.

Martin believed this kiva was built by the Chacoans about the same time as the original pueblo, around 1090 CE. He may be correct, but more recent thinking suggests that the kiva predates the structure. In addition to great kivas at the roughly 200 Chacoan outliers, archeologists know of roughly 200 isolated great kivas without associated villages. Some speculate that building a great kiva was the first step in colonizing an area. They believe that the kivas were built as a way of attracting local peoples to participate in ceremonies. When the kivas were successful as here, a pueblo was built. If the locals did not join in, the Chacoans moved on in search of greater opportunities.

Common Ground

The final sign on the south side of the kiva explains the communal functions of great kivas. We've already commented on that, but this is a good spot for photographs capturing the figures, stairway, and antechambers. Use a wide angle lens if you have one or compose several images that can be stitched together in a panorama.

When you have finished, a short trail takes you directly back to the parking area. Don't hesitate to stop at the shaded picnic tables to reflect on what you have seen or have lunch in the peaceful surroundings.

² See the companion essay, "What is a Kiva?" for a description of the common features.

On Your Way Out

Your drive back to civilization reverses the directions you followed to get here. And notice an intersection that will take you to Hovenweep National Monument, a mere 21 miles away.

Don't be too quick to leave Lowry and keep your eyes open as you depart. Roughly 50 yards from the end of the parking lot loop, there is a substantial mound on your right. Look closely because it is overgrown and easy to miss. The mound is the most visible remnant of an unexcavated tower. It marks one of several villages that were part of the Lowry community. None of these related sites have been developed for visitation and you should approach them with caution if you choose to venture off the beaten path. Remember, they are fragile and this is rattlesnake country.