

Sand Canyon Pueblo Site Guide

Sand Canyon Pueblo is one of the most important sites in the Mesa Verde area, but detailed information is difficult to find. Crow Canyon's excavation report is available online (http://www.crowcanyon.org/publications/sand_canyon_pueblo.asp) but typical readers will find it difficult going and the Bureau of Land Management provides only a map with and diagram.

A few websites overview Sand Canyon Pueblo but the most detailed popular report is found in *The Anasazi Guide*, which explains why the site is so important. This pamphlet compliments the *Guide* with stop-by-stop descriptions.

Sand Canyon Pueblo is one of three hardened sites in Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. "Hardened" normally means that the site has been prepared for visitation, and you might expect to find stabilized walls and blacktop paths along with rangers in drab green and tan uniforms. Wrong! You won't find any of those reminders of mass tourism here. At Sand Canyon, you will find peace and solitude along with a much more contemplative experience.

The Sand Canyon Story

At first glance, there is little to see at Sand Canyon Pueblo. Located at the head of Sand Canyon, the site is as spectacular as it is desolate. Today, only overgrown rubble mounds mark the presence of a major Northern San Juan Anasazi community. Modern excavations produced an incredibly rich portrait of life and death at the Pueblo. However, researchers reburied excavated structures and contoured the land to resemble its prior appearance. A comfortable walking trail and six interpretive signs are the only visible reminders of the research conducted here.

Fortunately, first impressions are deceptive. Sand Canyon Pueblo tells us much about the stress and turmoil that engulfed the Anasazi during the thirteenth century. Originally built over a thirty-year period beginning around 1240, the Pueblo was abandoned about 1285 following a catastrophic attack that killed many of the residents.¹ Significantly, there is no evidence of foreign attackers. Archeologists have concluded that people from local villages destroyed Sand Canyon, probably in a bid to control natural resources.

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 directions, information about current road conditions, and an informative site map.

¹ Evidence of a violent end includes eight crudely buried skeletons, partial remains of at least 13 additional bodies which were cast aside, and scattered human bones in six different architectural blocks. None were formally buried and many show signs of a violent death including broken arms and cracked skulls. Archeologists sampled less than 20% of the Pueblo and recovered the remains of at least 31 people in similar contexts. The actual death toll was probably much higher.

Getting to the site is a little tricky because there are no Monument signs along the route. Much of the trip is on county roads; most are graded dirt and gravel. They are passable in typical passenger vehicles, but you should avoid making the trip after significant rains and snowfall.

Here's how to get to Sand Canyon Pueblo:

1. From Cortez, Colorado, drive north on Highway 491 (formerly Highway 666).
2. About 5 miles north of Cortez, turn left (west) on County Road P; slow down as you cross County Road N because there is no "O" and the turn comes up quickly.
3. Road P twists and turns a bit, and appears to dead end at County Road 18. Turn left at the T intersection and right when County Road P resumes in less than a mile.
4. About 7.5 miles from Highway 491, you will see an important landmark, a white wood building with red trim and signage identifying it as the "Lewis-Arriola Fire Department." Stay on County Road P, but prepare to turn left.
5. Less than a mile after passing the fire department building, turn left on County Road 16.
6. Finally, turn right on County Road N and watch for a well signed BLM parking lot on your left. The turn is sharp and the parking area is small, so enter with caution.

Aside from a picnic table, there are no facilities at the site and overnight camping is not permitted.

Stop-by-Stop Directions

Two trails lead from the parking area. The one on your left leads to the Sand Canyon Trail about which we will say more in a while. Take the right hand trail to the Pueblo site, about 200 yards away. As you walk, look at the landscape. The thin, rocky soil is far from ideal, but the mesas around you held deeper, more fertile soil. Residents probably farmed the higher mesas and used check dams to capture soil-rich runoff.

Today, the trail is well shaded by trees and much of the ground is covered with low-lying shrubs and native grasses. All of this growth is modern, and you would have seen much more open space during the Anasazi era. Larger trees were used to construct the village while the shrubs were quickly consumed in the residents' fires. The area immediately surrounding the Pueblo was defined by bordered gardens, but scant traces remain.

Local game had been hunted out long before the Pueblo was built and the people relied on three principal crops: corn, squash, and beans. Had you visited during the Pueblo's heyday, 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.

Sign 1

There are no numbered markers here, but the interpretive signs posted along the trail are convenient reference points. You will encounter the first sign at a Y in the trail.

A diagram on the sign shows that the Pueblo was built around a spring at the head of Sand Canyon. This location gave the structure a distinct U shape as it curled around the cleft at the end of the canyon. Two story buildings occupied both sides of the cleft and stretched down the east side to the canyon floor. At its largest, the Pueblo contained an estimated 420 rooms, 90 kivas, 14 towers, an enclosed plaza, a unique D-shaped bi-wall building, and a great kiva. Archeologists estimate it was home to between 225 to 500 people.

While the location seems idyllic, there are signs that the settlement was not a peace. A masonry wall surrounded the exposed west, north, and east sides. Constructed around 1266 and strengthened in 1271, the wall has been reduced to a substantial rubble piles around the site. On the south, the pueblo opened to a cliff that drops sharply to the canyon floor, more than a hundred feet below.

Before you move on, look at the watercourse on your right. Runoff channeled through the wall was one of the primary sources of domestic water. Although few traces remain, a gap in the wall at this point, allowed water to flow into the Pueblo. When excavated, archeologists found that the gap was narrowed by several courses of new masonry late in the Pueblo's life. This narrowing suggests that tension was increasing and that the residents felt the need for ever greater protection.

When you are ready, turn right and follow the trail around the exterior of the pueblo. The tall rubble mounds on your left are the remnants of the defensive wall and larger piles of rubble mark the location of towers built along the wall. Entered only through the wall or openings on upper stories, the towers offered unobstructed lines of fire and made it possible for occupants to spot intruders on surrounding mesas.

Sign 2

The trail winds a bit but generally follows the line of the defensive wall. The second sign explains that the Pueblo contained thirteen "architectural blocks." We don't really know how the ancient occupants thought about the space, but archeologists recognize clusters of buildings. These blocks may reflect social clusters within the Pueblo and its history is consistent with that reflection. Sand Canyon was built relatively late in the Anasazi occupation and residents of several local villages may have come together here. Each cluster may have housed residents from formerly distinct villages. It is also possible that the clusters had religious or other significance. Some archeologists believe that Sand Canyon was a center for people from the surrounding villages.

Excavations at this point revealed two circular and one rectangular, aboveground kivas and a D-shaped tower in addition to storage rooms and trash middens. Kivas at other sites are usually dug into the ground, but the thin soil here required building above ground structures. And the mix of circular and rectangular kivas suggests a mixing of cultural traditions. All of these structures appear to have been built after the wall and the tower is a particularly interesting feature. Built on the outside of the wall, it appears to have been

intended to strengthen the defenses. Defenders behind slit windows could have rained arrows down on attackers at the base of the wall much as was done at European castles of the same era.

Before you move on, turn around and look at the ground contours. Notice that the land slopes gently toward the Pueblo and the canyon below. Here as elsewhere in the southwest, access to water was an important factor in selecting sites. Rain and snowmelt naturally flowed toward the canyon and were probably captured against the site enclosing wall before flowing through the gap mentioned above. Capturing this surface water was vital to sustaining live and reservoirs within the Pueblo likely held water for subsequent use.

Continue along the trail. The rubble pile over which you are walking is a part of the site enclosing wall. As you step down, you are entering the Western Plaza.

Sign 3

Stop here for a moment and turn in a complete circle. You are looking at the heart of the western wing, an area in which many community activities took place. Today your view is obstructed by trees, but during the Anasazi heyday the plaza was a large open space surrounded by small structures and kivas.

Look to your right as you face the sign. The rubble mound hides the remains of a circular tower that was remodeled into an aboveground kiva as well as six aboveground storage rooms. Excavations also revealed two large breaches in the site-enclosing wall. Neither breach was caused by natural collapse and the lay of the land makes it unlikely that they resulted from natural forces. Archeologists conclude that “the destruction was therefore apparently the work of humans,” and it is possible that the breaches here resulted from the attack that ended the life of the pueblo.

Follow the trail across the plaza and up a short set of modern steps to sign 4.

Sign 4

The slightly elevated overlook allows you to look down into the remains of several kivas as well as a unique D-shaped building called a “bi-wall.” Built with two concentric, arc-shaped walls with several rooms between, the size and shape of the building indicate that it was a special place. It probably stood two stories tall and featured an uncommonly large doorway facing the plaza. In addition, many of the rooms within the bi-wall were interconnected and unusual features in the kivas include unique ventilation systems and a large floor vault in one.

Several features of the structure suggest that it was carefully designed and planned to serve a special function. Archeologists point to the overall layout, its central position in the village, the uniformity of the bi-wall rooms, numerous interconnecting doorways, and the alignment of the exterior entryways with interior doors.

As the interpretive sign notes, this large structure was built during the early years of the Pueblo, perhaps around 1260 and was used throughout the life of the community. Parts were remodeled several times and there were at least four coats of plaster on the interior

walls of one kiva. Collapsed roofs were found throughout the block and archeologists believe that they were burned during the final attack.

From here, the trail continues south and leads you through a cluster of rooms associated with a smaller kiva. Excavations here revealed a circular, subterranean kiva, a mealing room, six storage rooms, two surface rooms and one subterranean room of indeterminate usage as well as a courtyard surface. Dating is uncertain, but it appears that the entire block was constructed in short order prior to 1271. The entire complex remained in use until the Pueblo was abandoned and the kiva roof was burned in the final attack.

Sign 5

The last sign on the west side calls attention to a partially excavated great kiva. Like all great kivas, this one was a focal point for community activities. Floor features were reburied after excavation, but the essay, “What is a kiva?” describes them.

Curiously, the block of rooms surrounding the great kiva appears to have been an after thought. The kiva itself was built within a massive circular wall resting on bedrock. Stones in the outer face of the wall were fully shaped and archeologists believe the builders intended it to be visible. Sometime later, a ring of buildings was added and the face of the wall was hidden.

Dating construction of this cluster is difficult. No datable beams were found in the kiva, but beams in the surrounding rooms date to around 1257. This suggests that the kiva was built early in the life of the Pueblo, as much as a decade before the surrounding rooms. Curiously, a thin layer of domestic trash on its floor suggests that the great kiva was abandoned before the surrounding rooms.

There are no more signs on this side of the Pueblo, but the trail continues southward to the cliff overlooking Sand Canyon. Watch your step along the edge, but enjoy the view. Residents of the Pueblo probably enjoyed the view as much as we do and it was a fine spot to watch anyone, friendly or hostile, approaching from the south.

While you are here, look east toward the east side of the Pueblo. Today, remnants of structures tumble down the hillside and the piles of rubble are a good indication of the Pueblo’s original size. This is also a good spot to take a break and I often find a shady spot where I can have a snack and write for a while. When you are ready to move on, follow the trail back to the Y intersection adjoining the watercourse.

Sign 1, Again

This is a convenient reference point and it gives you a choice. The left turn leads you back to the parking area; continue straight ahead to walk along the outside of the eastern wing of the Pueblo.

There’s only one sign along this side and it’s near the end of the trail. Most of the unexcavated structures on your right appear to have been residential units with a sprinkling of kivas. About 15 yards from the sign, you will notice an elevated mound. The mound hides the remains of a D-shaped tower and several associated rooms. Excavations here revealed four, and perhaps five, kivas and associated rooms as well as a substantial midden.

Like the towers on the west side, this one is on the outer face of the defensive wall. There is pretty good evidence that the tower was added after the wall was built. The evidence includes loopholes in the defensive wall that were blocked by the tower as well as the doorway to the tower that was knocked through the wall latter. All this suggests that the tower was not part of the initial plan and was added as tension increased and residents wanted more protection.

Tree-ring dates suggest that the tower was added shortly after 1266, just after the initial construction of the wall. This tells us that tension was building just two and a half decades after the initial construction of the Pueblo. The rooms in this block were all abandoned at the same time, probably when residents left the village after the final attack.

As you continue along the trail, you may be tempted to climb the rubble mounds on your right. I recommend against it; the underlying structures are fragile, there is little novel to see, and there is a substantial risk of tumbling over the edge. A wiser plan is to continue to the final sign at the end of the trail.

Sign 6

The trail ends at an excavated room block and an excellent overlook. From here, you can look down to remnants of several room blocks as well as the remains of twin towers at the base of the cliff. As the sign notes, the towers may have regulated access to parts of the Pueblo on the canyon floor and along the lower portions of the hillside.

Excavations near the sign revealed a circular tower, a circular aboveground kiva with corner storage rooms, one living room with five storage rooms, a mealing room, and a courtyard surface along with refuse deposits and a large room whose function could not be determined. Archeologists believe that there was another kiva in the cluster but it was not excavated.

The buildings were all built in a single episode around 1260 and it appears that the defensive wall was built around them. There are few signs of remodeling and a thin layer of trash in the rooms suggests that they were occupied for a short time and abandoned before the rest of the Pueblo.

Rubble mounds continue along the base of the south end of the promontory on which you are standing. Most remain unexcavated and there is little to see aside from scattered piles of stone. Rather than taking a risky route beyond the end of the trail, retrace your steps and return to the parking area.

If you are anxious to see more, consider a short albeit demanding walk down the Sand Canyon Trail. This end of the trail is steep with several switchbacks. Don't attempt the hike unless you are in good condition, are wearing appropriate footwear, and have plenty of water with you.

The first mile or so of the trail carries you down the face of the hillside and there isn't much to see, just a pleasant walk through the forest. However, the trees open as you approach the floor of the canyon and you will be treated to spectacular several views of the cliff face on which Sand Canyon Pueblo stood. From here, the defensive character of the site is dramatically apparent, but only the larger piles of rubble are visible.

If you enjoy the hike, a route is also available from the south (see related hiking guide also on this site). The southern route is has a more moderate grade and there are abundant archeological sites along the way.

On Your Way Out

When you've finished, your trip back to civilization reverses the route you followed coming in. As you drive, watch for untilled mounds in the cultivated fields along the way. Most of them are unexcavated sites and their location gives you a rough idea of the community surrounding Sand Canyon Pueblo. You may also notice a number of crumbling homesteads, convenient reminders that the Anasazi aren't the only people forced to abandon the area.