

# Tour Notes on Aztec Ruins

## Meet on the Visitors' Center Patio

Welcome to Aztec Ruins! The structures here are among the largest and most impressive Anasazi buildings in the southwest. The tour booklet prepared by the National Park Service is pretty good, but there were a number of things I added while conducting tours there. Here are some of the most important items:

- First, let's talk about the name, "Aztec Ruins." Were the Aztecs here? No! The name comes to us largely from Victorian prejudices. The first full-time western settlers arrived here in the 1870s. They didn't believe the indigenous (aka, "Native American") people could have built something so impressive and applied the only name that made sense to them, hence "Aztec."
- Second, Archeologists refer to Aztec as a "Chacoan Outlier." That means that the architecture and building practices are closely related to those evidenced in Chaco Canyon, roughly 50 miles south of us. For details, please see the essay on Chacoan Outliers also reproduced on the "Etcetera" page.
- Third, much of the archeological research here was conducted at the dawn of southwestern archeology. Earl Morris excavated here from roughly 1916 through 1928. He concentrated on exposing the West Ruin and only a few of the other "mounds" on the monument have been fully excavated.
- Finally, dating is important. Morris thought that Aztec was built early in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, abandoned for a period of time, and subsequently reoccupied by different people from the Northern San Juan region. With modern techniques, we have been able to revise the sequence and provide a more accurate picture of Anasazi occupation:
  - The West Ruin was built in a single major construction episode, 1111 to 1115 CE by tree ring dates.
  - Other structures as well as remodeling followed. It appears that construction was an ongoing process, and major efforts took place whenever weather conditions resulted in food surpluses.
  - The whole community was abandoned during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. There are no signs of catastrophic events, so it appears that the residents simply drifted away as agricultural conditions deteriorated.

Let's begin our walk into and around the West Ruin.

## On the Trail Leading to the first Marker

We are passing along the exterior of the West Ruin. When completed, it had more than 400 rooms. That makes it the third largest known Anasazi structure. Only Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl, both in Chaco Canyon, were larger.

As we walk, look at the wall on your right. The exposed masonry is clearly Chacoan. Notice that all of the stones were shaped on all six sides and the masonry courses are uniform with relatively small areas of exposed mortar. These features help to distinguish Chacoan structures from those built by people of the Mesa Verdean and Kayenta traditions. See Chapter 2 of *The Anasazi Guide* for details.

While Aztec is a Chacoan structure, it has one unique feature. See the band of green stones in the wall? It is found in none of the other known Chacoan structures. We don't know what it signifies, but we can tell that it was a failure point in the construction. The green stones are softer than the others and the wall eventually failed along this line.

Watch your step as we climb the stairs up to marker #1.

## **At Marker #1**

We've got a great overview here, and it's one of my favorite spots. Please watch your footing while we're here. There are a number of places where you can take a nasty spill that could ruin your day. And if anyone tumbles into a kiva or over the edge, I'll have to spend the afternoon filling out forms [with humor].

This is a good spot to look at the overall design of the West Ruin. Notice that it is roughly E shaped within a rectangle 360 feet long by 280 feet wide. The central courtyard measures approximately 200 by 180 feet and the roofed structure in the middle is the Great Kiva. We will say more about the Kiva when we get there. Right now it's worth noting that an overall design is one of the hallmarks of a Chacoan structure and it's easy to see the E shape of Aztec Ruin.

Before we move on, I'd like to use your imagination a bit. With a bit of work, you can see what the greater Aztec community looked like in its heyday:

- First, mentally strip away the modern features. The first to go is the Visitors' Center. It is a modern structure built around a house Earl Morris constructed from sandstone blocks recovered during excavation. Of course, the modern houses and trailers should go as well. They sit on what were once fertile agricultural fields. While we're at it, let's get rid of the trees and shrubs; during the Anasazi era they would have been used as construction timber and firewood.
- Second, look to the East. The line of greener trees marks the course of the Animas River. Aztec Ruin is situated on a broad cobblestone terrace defined by the river and the hillside behind us. Much of the area around us would have been planted in the Anasazi's principal crops: corn, squash, and beans. In the spring, the fields would have been a bright green. As harvest time neared, the fields would have turned a golden brown. After the harvest, you would have seen stone borders defining the fields along with irrigation channels bringing life giving water.
- Now, look at the buildings we can still see here. We're standing on the West Ruin. To the east under the large cottonwood tree is the East Ruin; largely unexcavated, it was nearly as big as the West Ruin. Just to the east, the mound is the Annex and the mound north of it is the Earl Morris Ruin. If you are counting, that's four great houses here. We know of three more associated with Aztec: two on the crest of the hill behind us and one to the west. Remember the gray house

you drove by when you turned off the main road? As you drive out, look again. The mound on which it sits consists of the remains of another great house!

- Finally, look at the hillside. You see an historic roadway cut into the face. It roughly parallels the remains of an ancient road; it stands out because trees and shrubs along its course are slightly greener because the road hollow still retains moisture. That ancient road is an extension of one of the Chacoan roads that runs all the way from Chaco Canyon in the south. When Aztec was occupied, the road entered the complex on the southeast, ran between the East and West Ruins, and up the hillside to the complexes on the mesa above.

Coincidentally, the structures within Aztec are merely the most central elements of the Greater Aztec community. An archeological survey conducted in 1987 recorded eight isolated kivas and at least seven buildings with twenty or more rooms in addition to numerous field houses, shrines, and refuse scatters. Beyond the known sites, countless others may have been obscured or destroyed by modern development.

Let's continue our walk. The doorway on the right near the northwestern corner is a modern entrance. We'll bypass it for the moment as we go back to look at a unique and important structure. Don't worry; we'll take advantage of the doorway on the way back.

## **At the Hubbard Tri-wall**

The mound we're standing on is called the Hubbard Tri-wall. It has been backfilled to protect it but you can still see the tops of the walls. These walls define a structure composed of three concentric circles with a handful of walls radiating out from the inner circle to form 22 distinct chambers. You can see a diagram and more precise dimensions in *The Anasazi Guide*.

The tri-wall was a relatively late addition to Aztec and we still aren't certain how it was used or what its structure signified to the original inhabitants. For what its worth, the tri-wall was used for a relatively brief period of time. Built late in the Anasazi occupation, the tri-wall was abandoned and used as a trash dump before the Anasazi left the area. Dating is based on pottery sherds disposed of in the structure because the roof beams had been salvaged for use elsewhere in the structure. When first built, the central circle once contained a plaza, but a kiva was subsequently dug in the center.

Coincidentally, the Hubbard Tri-wall is one of about a dozen known to exist in the southwest. There are two other tri-walls here at Aztec, both unexcavated, two in Chaco Canyon, one of which can be seen at Pueblo del Arroyo, and another 7 on closed or private land elsewhere.

Now, let's continue our walk, back the way we came to the modern doorway into the West Ruin.

## **Inside the West Ruin**

Watch your step as we enter. The small stairway can come as a bit of a surprise and there are a number of low doorways ahead.

We're now on the ground floor but there's about a foot of fill over the original floor surface. This is a good chance to see the construction and roof details. The ones we see here have been stabilized and rebuilt, generally using original materials, but the reconstruction is pretty accurate.

As we walk through the heart of the pueblo, watch the doorways on the right. Plexiglas has been inserted to keep us from wandering too far, but you can see something that made excavations here very important. After Aztec was abandoned, this structure collapsed from the top down. Rubble from above filled the lower rooms, sealing out oxygen, and preserving organic materials seldom found elsewhere. Fragile items recovered include 704 bone awls, 87 baskets, 77 arrows, 143 fiber pots, and 104 sandals. And notice that hanging mats that originally closed the doors are still in place. The view here is limited by dirt surrounding the mats, but you can see a larger section in the museum.

Remember, watch your head as we go through several low doorways. Our next stop is the reconstructed great kiva in the plaza.

## Inside the Great Kiva

Welcome to the great kiva! Its one of the few that you can enter today and displays the features commonly found in a kiva. These are details in a related essay, "What is a Kiva," on this web page.

This great kiva has an interesting and unfortunate history. It was excavated by Morris in 1921 and early photographs show that the critical features were well defined. Unfortunately, there was no money to protect the exposed structure and it filled with water every time rain or snow fell. By 1933, its distinctive features had washed away and the kiva had become little more than an "offensive tumble of stones and a pond of standing water after every rain." Faced with impending loss of the kiva, the National Park Service hired Morris to supervise its reconstruction.

Morris visited Chaco Canyon in search of models, but found nothing that interested him. He elected to rebuild the Great Kiva on the basis of his recollections and intuition. The result is a unique mixture of the original structure and Morris' imagination. Today's archeologists believe Morris made three errors:

1. The roof appears to be too high. With the benefit of hindsight and another 8 decades of research, specialists believe the roof is as much as six feet to high.
2. Morris believed he had good reasons to use masonry pillars. This is unusual and other excavated great kivas use wooden posts (actually whole trees) to support the roof.
3. Finally the open windows around the exterior seem to be incorrect. The open windows compromise the natural insulation created by surrounding earth and are not evident in other excavated kivas. Other kivas have wooded "steps" as those you see, but they are enclosed within solid walls. My guess is that the recesses Morris encountered were niches rather than windows.

So, what do we make of the Great Kiva? To me, the errors pale in significance compared to the opportunity to step inside. And, they tell us a bit about the archeological state of the art in the early 1930s.

At your leisure, you can return to the Visitor's Center. If you haven't already done so, spend some time in the museum. The fragile artifacts are unrivaled by any others on display in the southwest.