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Pieces of the past

Aztec ruin provides clues to Puebloans in New Mexico

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By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty Special to the Sun

AZTEC, N.M. -- "Bet that's a fake," I said, as we turned the corner and spotted the "Aztec Ruins" sign. A theme park, maybe, but not genuine Aztec ruins. No way, Montezuma. The Aztecs lived in old Mexico, not New Mexico.

It reminded me of the "Wild West Buffalo" signs we used to see driving west through Nebraska on Route 30. They pointed the way toward a dusty souvenir store on the roadside, where the owners kept a couple of mangy bison in a pen out back.

» [Click to enlarge image](#)

This site was home to ancestral Pueblo people, not Aztecs. Scholars once thought the Aztecs migrated to Mexico from the southwestern United States. Later, commercial maps and early settlers mistakenly called monumental ruins along the Animas River the "Aztec Ruins."

Aztec Ruins National Monument

Where: 84 County Road 2900, Aztec, N.M. The park is on U.S. 64, in northwest New Mexico. Start your tour at the Visitors Center. A parking lot and bathrooms are adjacent.

How much? \$4 for adults, and free for senior citizens and children 16 and younger.

Call: 505-334-6174 or visit www.nps.gov/azru.

But we were ahead of schedule on our car trip across northern New Mexico and the July morning felt cool and fresh. Want to stop and stretch our legs? Let's check it out.

Aztec Ruins National Monument, misnamed by early settlers, is a gem of a park. On 320 acres near the Animas River, it contains a half-dozen structures built and inhabited between 1,000 and 1,250 by people now called ancestral Puebloans (formerly known as the Anasazi).

Though most of the ruins are unexcavated, the West Ruins site, behind the Visitors Center, is not restored, but what they call fully-excavated and stabilized. This rambling communal structure, the Monument's, is an all-in-one village - and apartment house, if you will - with 400 tiny rooms in a crescent facing south.

"They built it that way, on purpose, for warmth," said Gary Brown, the park's chief archaeologist who was in the Visitors Center when we arrived at 9 a.m.

"It was the solar technology of the time. You'll see what I mean when you walk through."

And with a little imagination, it was easy to picture another July morning, in 1200 A.D., with women tending their fires, children playing and the first light striking the doors.

Though Aztec Ruins is smaller than nearby Chaco Canyon, built in the

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same period, and unlike Mesa Verde, 35 miles north, hidden in canyon-wa travelers, it has other handy features.

The Monument is rarely crowded, attracting only 45,000 visitors annually. You can tour all of the West Ruins site in an hour. You can go on your own, without a guide, a bonus if you hate to be herded into groups, as you will be in Mesa Verde. And you'll remember more if you guide yourself with the Trail Guide pamphlet, sold for \$1.50 at the Visitors Center.

Aztec Ruins makes you think, as you wander from one tiny room to the next. How did the builders carry so many sandstone blocks from the quarry, several miles away? Why were the windows so tiny and how did the residents get into the rooms without doors? The West Ruin, walled on three sides, felt like a fortress. Was protection important? Yet other evidence - similar building styles and a network of roads - suggests the Four Corners people knew their neighbors, and often moved from one pueblo to another.

In the end, I had more questions for Ranger Naturalist Marti Stebbins than would fit in an hour, or that she could answer definitively. As she pointed out, there are so many ruins inside and near the Monument, many still unexcavated, that understanding the early Pueblos is a work in progress.

"We already have so much sitting on shelves - by that I mean rooms full of artifacts and data - that scholars looking at archived material regularly come up with new interpretations of the past," she said.

Though I was already entranced with my first happy impression - families living in peace - I was forced to backtrack. Scholars, citing the presence of nine perfectly round kivas in the Central Plaza, think that the West Ruins was probably a community building, used for gatherings and ceremonies.

The Great Kiva, largest of the nine, was discovered and partially excavated in 1921 by archeologist Earl H. Morris, who led the first ongoing, scientific dig on behalf of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Later, Morris returned and completed the restoration. In contrast, the other West Ruins have been stabilized only, to prevent further deterioration.

In the century's early decades, archaeologists rebuilt walls with ordinary cement, a technique no longer in favor. "Now we use Daraweld, a latex-based concrete adhesive," Brown said. "It not only holds better and resists weathering but looks more natural."

With the trail guide in hand, we followed the path, partially paved, that led from one numbered location to the next, along the west wall and through a series of small ground floor rooms on the north side. The tiny doorways between them, knocked out during the 1880s by looters searching for pottery, have been left to allow access.

Instead, you would have climbed down into these rooms from the room above, by a ladder. Since the only openings are slits in the upper walls, the north side rooms were dim and dark. Archaeologists who found broken pottery, cloth fragments, worn tools and sandals think these were storage areas.

Another clue to age and use are the walls themselves, built of carefully shaped and fitted sandstone and chinked or plastered with mud. As each story was finished, it was roofed with pine or spruce beams, overlaid with aspen poles, covered with juniper or rush matting and topped with a layer of mud.

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With the top floor gone and the inner walls exposed, you can see where the guide, Morris found a dozen skeletons wrapped for burial and surrounded by beads and pottery. The rooms at Stops 10, 11 and 12 show that they were used as burial chambers, workshops, toilets and storage.

Stops 19 and 20 are inside the Great Kiva. Here Morris' excavations showed that four massive pillars supported a 95-ton roof. Each pillar stood on a shaped limestone base weighing about 355 pounds, carried - somehow, without wheels or horses - 40 miles from the nearest mountains.

At the last stop on our walk, Stop 22, the trail guide posed a question I've heard before, at the Mayan ruins in Honduras, on Easter Island in the South Pacific and in central Alaska. Why, in the mid-1300s, did all the Pueblos in the Four Corners region suddenly abandon their villages?

Think about the supply of natural resources, says the guide. After 200 years in one place, how productive was the land? How much farther did they have to go to find firewood or to hunt game?

Not that far, it seems. The ancestral Pueblos moved east to open land in Arizona and the Rio Grande Valley. But where will we go, the inhabitants of planet Earth, when we've used or destroyed what we have?

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