



Chaco Canyon

Photographs by Rolf Brauch ~ September 1997





One of the best kept secrets of the Southwest, the ruins of Chaco Canyon are spectacular examples of Anasazi Indian culture.





Anasazi is the name given to the prehistoric Indians who inhabited the Four Corners area of southeastern Utah, southwestern Colorado, northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico for over 2,000 years from before 700 B.C. to the arrival of the Spaniards.

The Chaco Canyon ruins lie in the center of the treeless Chaco Basin in the northwestern part of New Mexico, bounded on the east by the Continental Divide and on the west by the Chuska Mountains. The basin lies at an altitude of 6,000 to 7,000 feet.

Pueblo Bonito, among a number of other settlements along a seven mile stretch of Chaco Canyon was constructed during a period of 200 years between 920 and 1120. This has been confirmed by tree-ring dating of the wooden beams found at the site.





At first glance, if it weren't for the desert setting, the Chaco ruins could easily be mistaken for ruins of middle-age European castles.

Most of the buildings were constructed of unfaced sandstone slabs laid in double rows and sealed with clay mortar.





Pueblo Bonito was the largest of the Anasazi buildings, housing perhaps 1,000 or more people in some 600 rooms. The U.S. Army first described the ruins in 1849 and by the turn of the century, 190 rooms and kivas (like the one above) had been excavated and more than 10,000 pieces of pottery, turquoise beads and pendants had been shipped to museums in New York.

Pueblo Bonito easily stood five stories high along the rear wall. There may have been as many as 800 rooms — the exact number is unknown because many of the upper walls have collapsed after the pueblo was abandoned. Many of the rooms were quite large and built of unusually fine sandstone masonry.

The great kiva at Chetro Ketl (above) is sixty feet in diameter and fourteen feet deep — it had a flat roof. Kivas were thought to be used for formal community gatherings or perhaps for religious ceremonies.





A view into the past. The exquisite masonry easily rivals anything constructed by the robber barons of Europe during the middle ages.





Archeologists reckon that the outer walls were probably a community effort and the interior rooms a family undertaking. The rooms were terraced to allow access to the upper rooms without interior staircases. In the later stages, Pueblo Bonito became like a fort with a single entrance in the south wall — all other external doorways were sealed. This was probably done as a defensive measure to guard against marauding tribes, probably due to the forced migration of many tribes brought on by several extended drought throughout the entire region.

There is evidence of community efforts and cooperation throughout the area, not just at the Chaco sites. The Chacoans pooled their labour to construct the large rampart wall holding up the entire east end of the site. Chacoan farmers also combined their efforts to build extensive systems of farming terraces and water collection systems.





The search for seven mythical cities of silver and gold, brought the Spanish conquistadores to the area. A number of expeditions, beginning in 1539 found nothing but small villages made of mud and stone inhabited by people rich in ceremonialism but poor in material possessions.

Beginning in 1598 the Spanish began to colonize New Mexico, forcing the Indians to convert to Christianity and virtually enslaving them. Life under Spanish authority became increasingly oppressive, resulting in the Great Pueblo Revolt of 1680. The uprising was a success, forcing the Spaniards to retreat to El Paso. For the next twelve years the Indians enjoyed self rule again. In 1693, Diego de Vargas reconquered the area. By 1700, disease, famine and warfare had reduced the native population by one-half and the number of villages to 19.

In 1821 the War of Independence transferred jurisdiction of New Mexico from Spain to Mexico and the Indians were bestowed full rights of citizenship. By contrast, the US only granted Indians full citizenship (including the right to vote) in 1924, and Arizona and New Mexico did so only after a federal lawsuit in 1948.

In 1848, at the end of the war between the US and Mexico, New Mexico became a territory of the US and much Indian land was given away to a flood of new settlers. It was not until 1975 that the US Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination act and since then tribes have been gaining greater control over their own affairs and greater freedom to plan their futures.





Peeking into the past at what appears to have been an oven.





Another interesting thing about the Chaco culture is the system of roadways linking other Anasazi communities throughout the Chaco Basin. Known segments of roads (about 400 miles) extend in all directions.

Seen from the air, the roads are arrow straight. The Great North Road has been traced 60 miles to Bloomfield.

It is widely believed that the Chacoans controlled, influenced, or traded with Anasazi villages located in a great arc from what is today St. Johns, Arizona, to Cortez, Colorado.

In the photograph below, the holes in the rear wall clearly show where support beams for the upper floors were set into the walls.





In this photograph at least four stories are clearly visible.

The stones in this structure were not cut nearly as precise as in other structures, indicating a different time period or different builders.





Careful inspection of the wall in the photograph on the right reveals that sections were built by different masons — much like in Egypt, archeologists are able to recognize the 'signature' of specific builders just by the way stones were cut and set.

These buildings are all the more remarkable when we consider that the Chacoans had no metal tools until the Spaniards arrived.





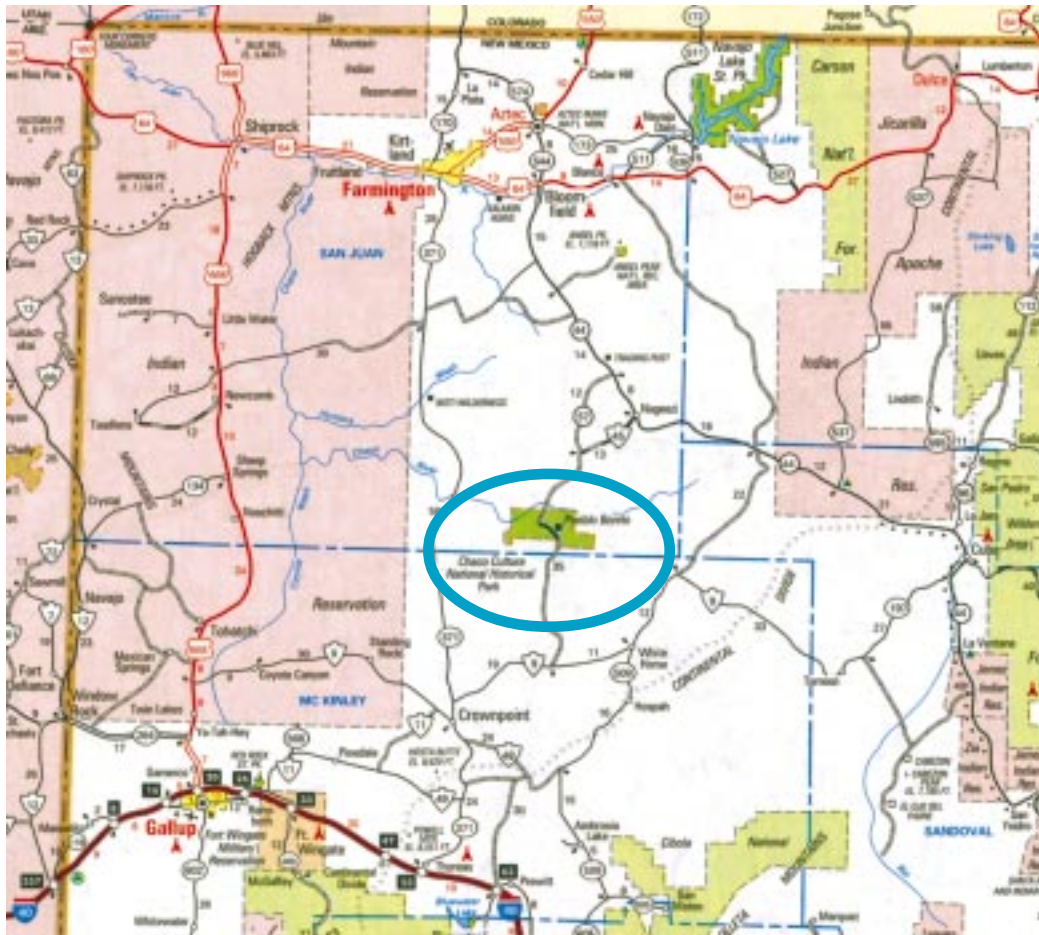
Built around, next to, and on top of large boulders broken off from the escarpment, it is difficult to imagine the amount of labour that went into these magnificent structures.





There is a good deal of mystery surrounding the Kivas, the underground rooms found at each site. Due to the absence of written records, archaeologists can only speculate as to their exact use. Common features such as holes in the ceiling, through which ladders extended, served as access. Depending on their size, Kivas had one or more fire pits and shafts to permit fresh air to enter.





A little out of the way, but a must see!

Chaco Culture National Historical Park is located in the northwest of New Mexico, about 2.5 hours south of Durango, Colorado (coming down route 550 on the above map) and 2 hours north of Interstate 40. Although it's not mandatory, my advice would be to take a four-wheel drive vehicle. Once you leave either route 44 if you're coming south from Durango, or route 9 if you're coming north — the dirt roads quickly turn into a track and it gets rougher the closer you get to Chaco. Strangely enough, the road that loops through the park itself is paved (most likely for the practical purpose of keeping the dust down).

If you are just passing through and intend to take Chaco in on the fly, plan carefully. There is no hotel/motel within 50 miles — the best place to stay is Durango, it has an abundance of hotels

and motels, lots of great restaurants, jewellery and art stores. It makes a good base camp from which to explore other attractions within driving distance, Mesa Verde (45 minutes west), Canyon de Chelly (3.5 hours southwest into Arizona), Monument Vally, Valley of the Gods, Goosenecks State Park (3.5 hours northwest into Utah), and the Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad (a scenic fifty mile ride up a very narrow canyon).

For a more detailed history on Chaco Canyon see:

<http://www.learner.org/exhibits/collapse/>

