



Mesa Verde

A Fascinating Journey Into The Past

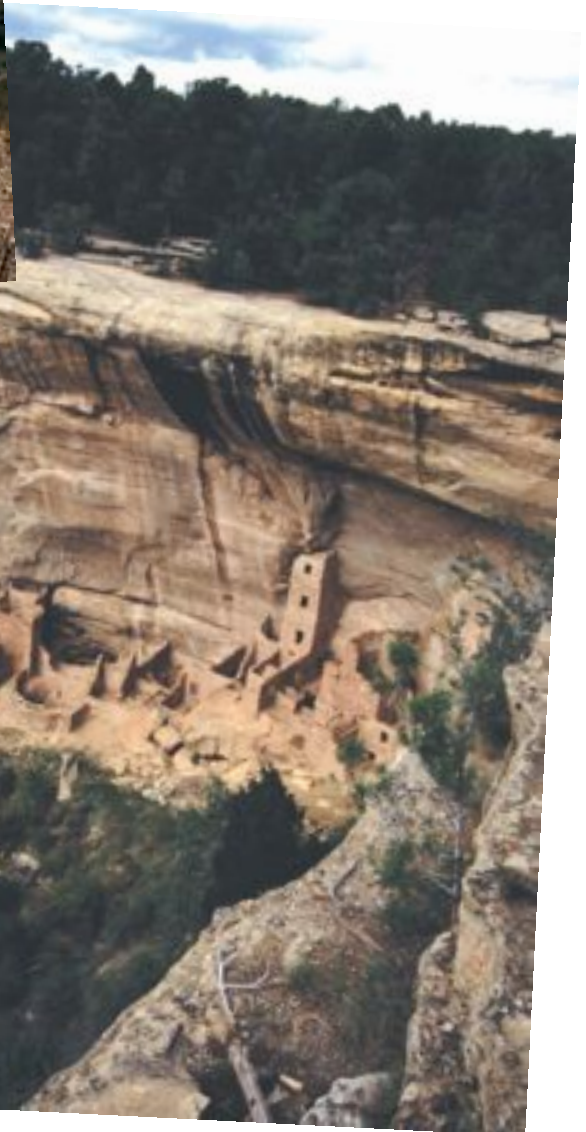
The Mesa Verde, Spanish for 'green plateau', was so named because it was covered with forests of juniper and pinion pines. It lies within the Montezuma Valley in Colorado at an altitude between 7,000 and 8,500 feet. The 2,000 feet or so of sandstone making up most of the mesa was created by a great inland sea that covered the area for a 10 million year period 100 million years ago.



On the cover: entrance to a Kiva, believed to be an underground ceremonial room.

An abundant and varied fossil record reveals great variations in environments during this period.

The uplift of the area at the end of the Cretaceous Period drained the sea and initiated a long period of erosion that created the present day topography. Fossils found near the top of the formation have been dated to be approximately 87.5 million years old.



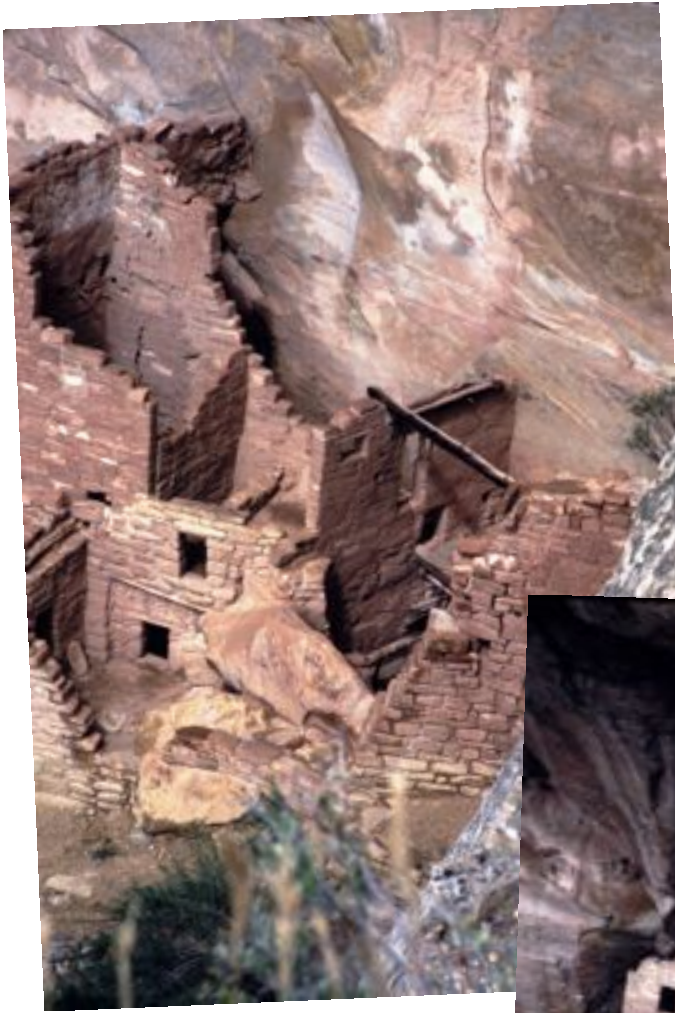
Mesa Verde, with its steep cliffs and deep narrow canyons, provides a spectacular window into the time when the Ancestral Pueblo Indians populated the region. It is estimated that the Anasazi (a Navajo word for 'ancient ones') lived here for over 700 years (from the 5th to the 12th century).



Above: Cliff Palace... definitely a must see.

Pueblos (communal dwellings) are commonly found in Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and places like Mesa Verde. They are typically constructed of flat roofed stone or adobe (mud) houses, joined together as one building somewhat like apartment complexes. The spectacular ruins at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (2.5 hours south of Durango), clearly show evidence that some structures were easily seven stories high.





At Mesa Verde elaborate stone communities were built in the sheltered alcoves of the canyon walls with some consisting of more than 200 rooms. Mesa Verde has some of the best-preserved examples of ancient culture in North America and is easily the most famous. Today, the Mesa Verde National park encompasses over 4,000 known archeological sites, including over 600 cliff dwellings.



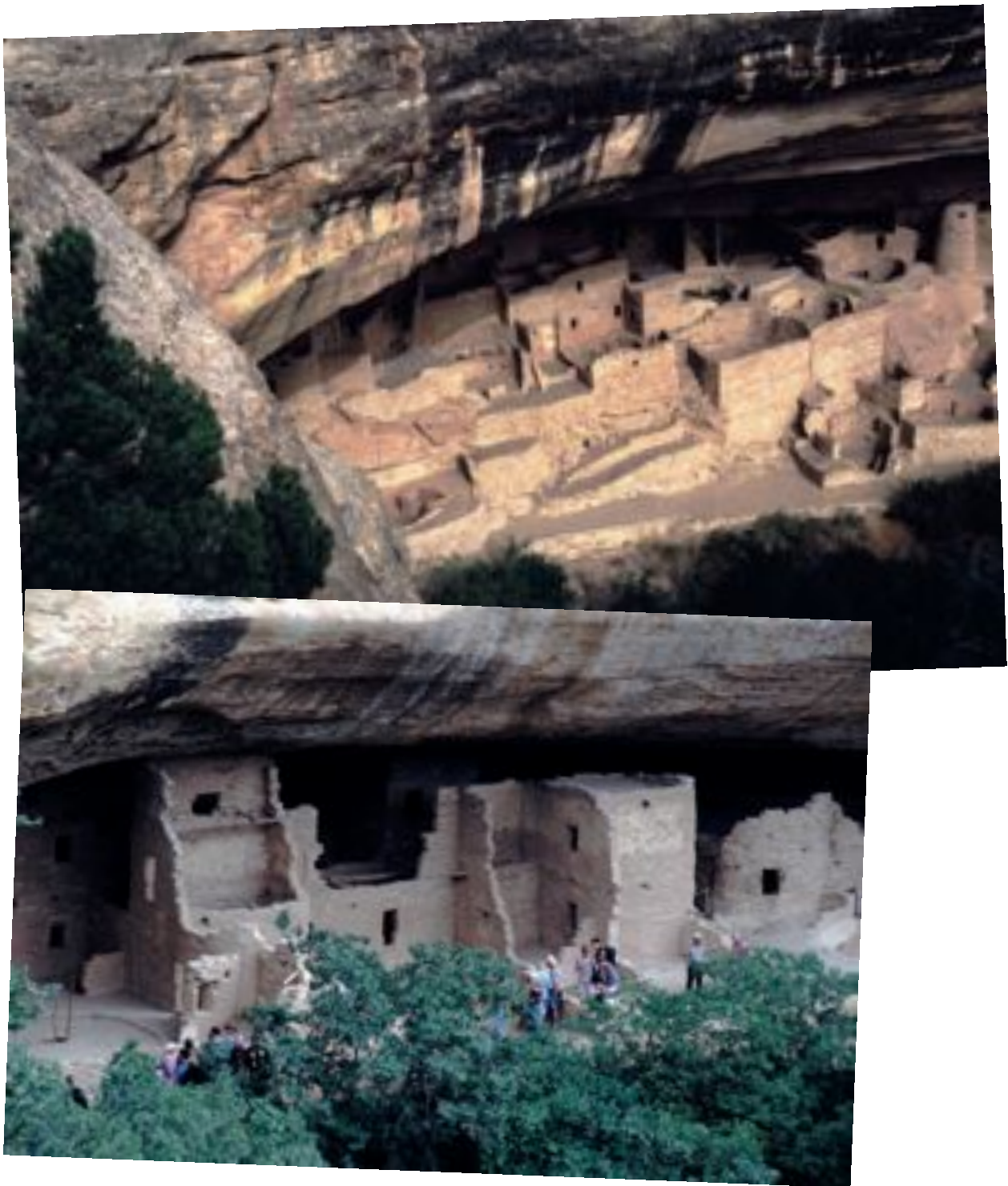


Stephouse and
Longhouse



Archeologist believe the natives left this region during a century of prolonged draughts (one of seventeen-year duration).

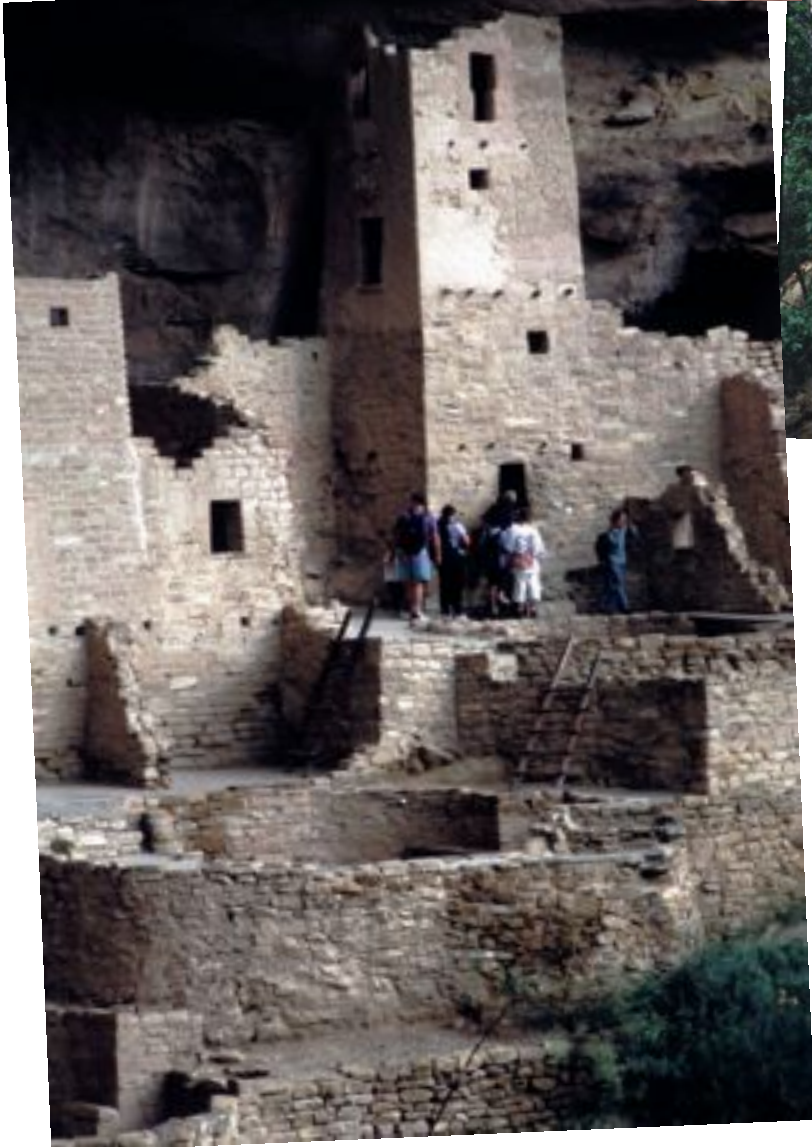
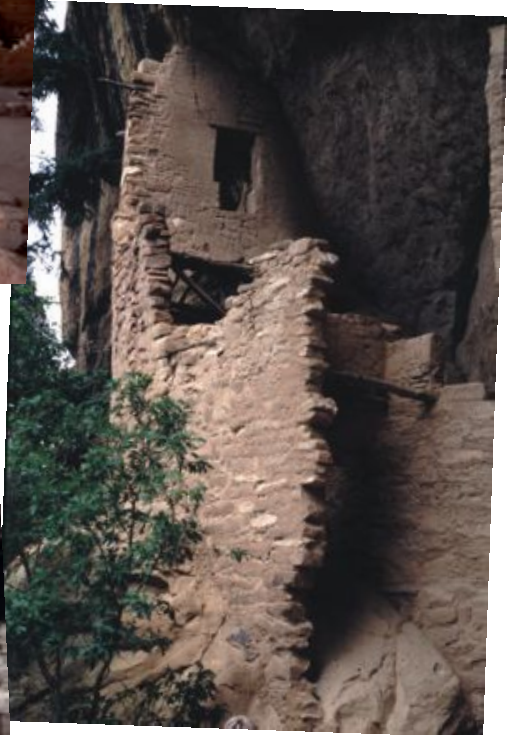
However, I believe they left because the Spaniards came and started raising the rent.



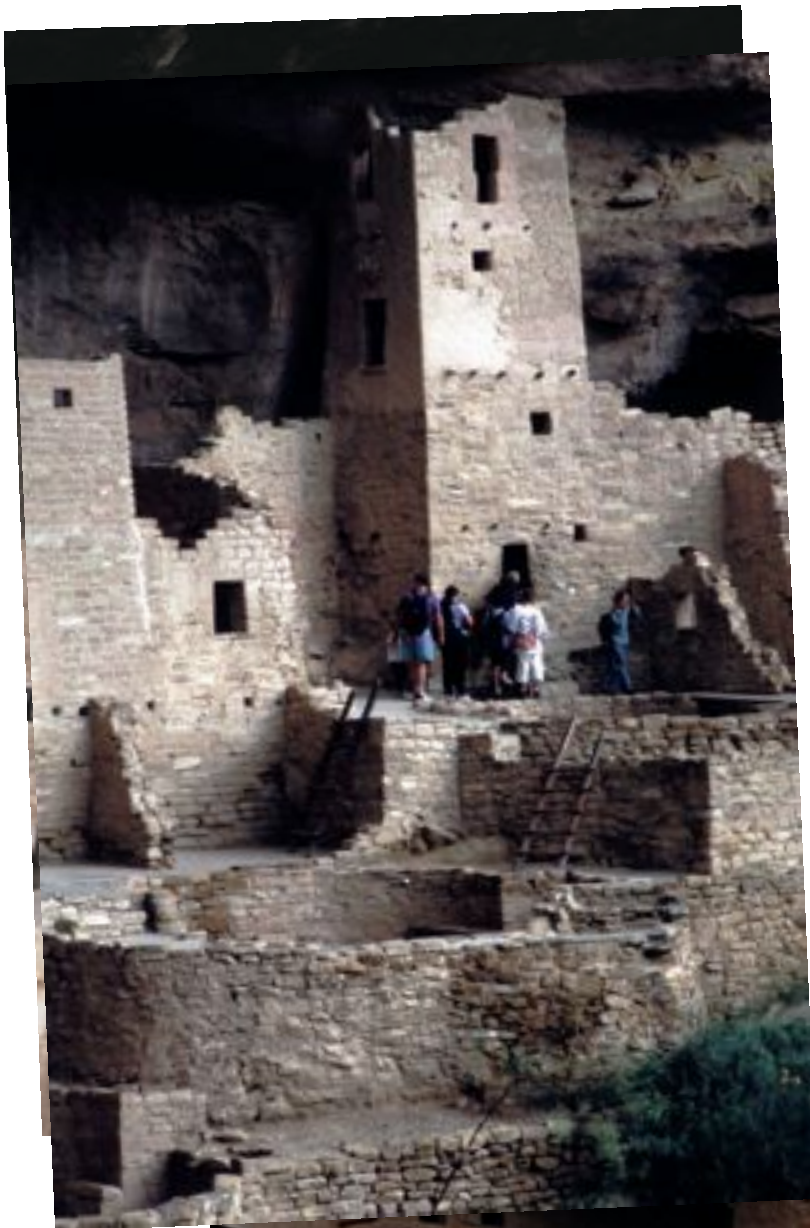
Although there are a number of self-guided exhibits on the top of the mesa, most of the cliff dwellings can only be toured in guided groups and at pre-set times. The majority are accessible via short but strenuous walks — up and down several hundred feet of steep paths. A few require climbing the odd ladder or squeezing through crevices in the rock. Some are really interesting but definitely not for claustrophobics. One should also take care to avoid poison-oak which grows here in abundance.



Left: Longhouse



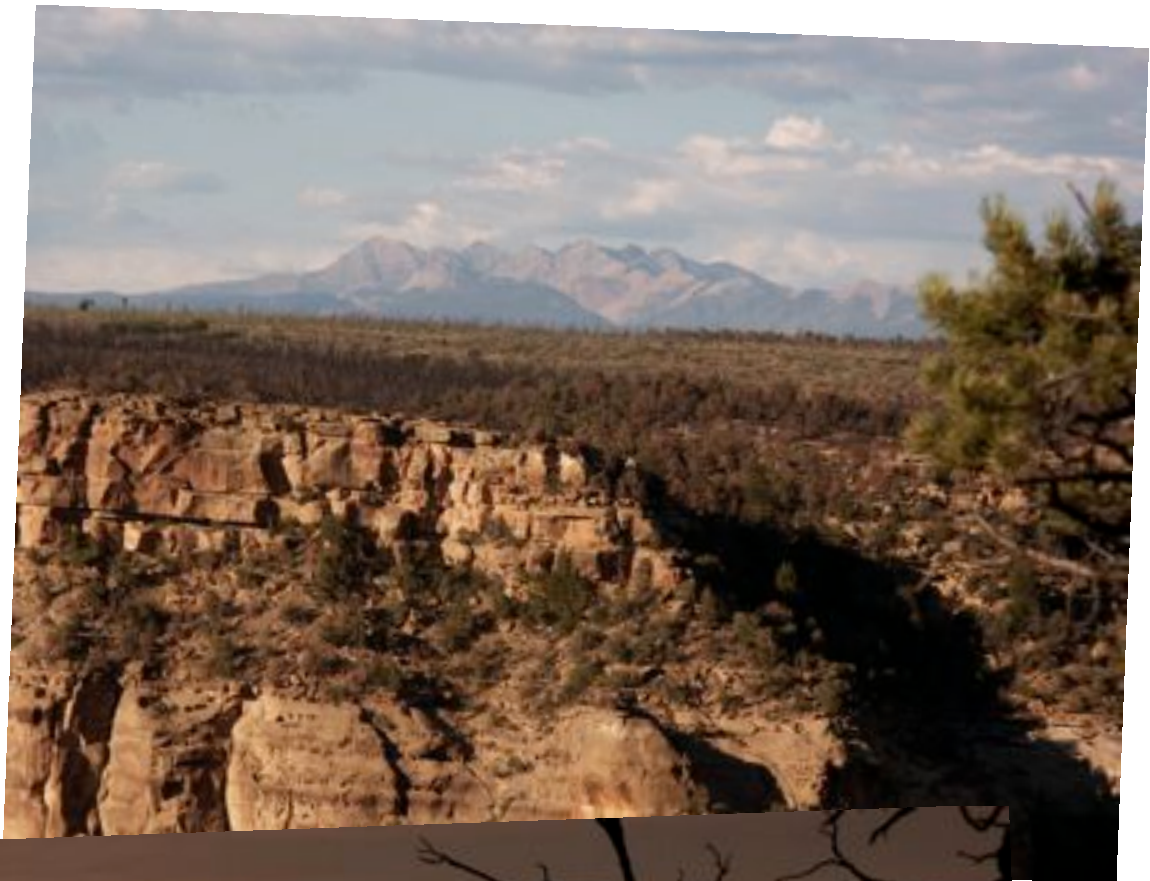
Wildlife is abundant in Mesa Verde — tourists, deer, mules, bighorns, coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions and cougars, porcupines, cottontail rabbits, chipmunks, black bears, and foxes can be found. Well over 100 species of birds including jays, owls, woodpeckers, crows, and hawks make their home here, as well as many types of lizards and several species of snakes.



Another reason to visit for more than one day is to do some careful planning to determine the order in which to see the cliff dwellings. This depends entirely on the direction the sunlight is coming. All of the cliff dwellings are set into partial caves on the sides of perpendicular cliffs, one needs the help of sunlight to provide enough light for proper exposure. You can forget about your flash — these places are far too big for a flash to be of help.

Some sites are better to view in the morning, others have better light in the afternoon. It really depends on which direction the canyons run and which side the cliff dwellings are on. Mid-day in the middle of the summer is the worst time for photography.





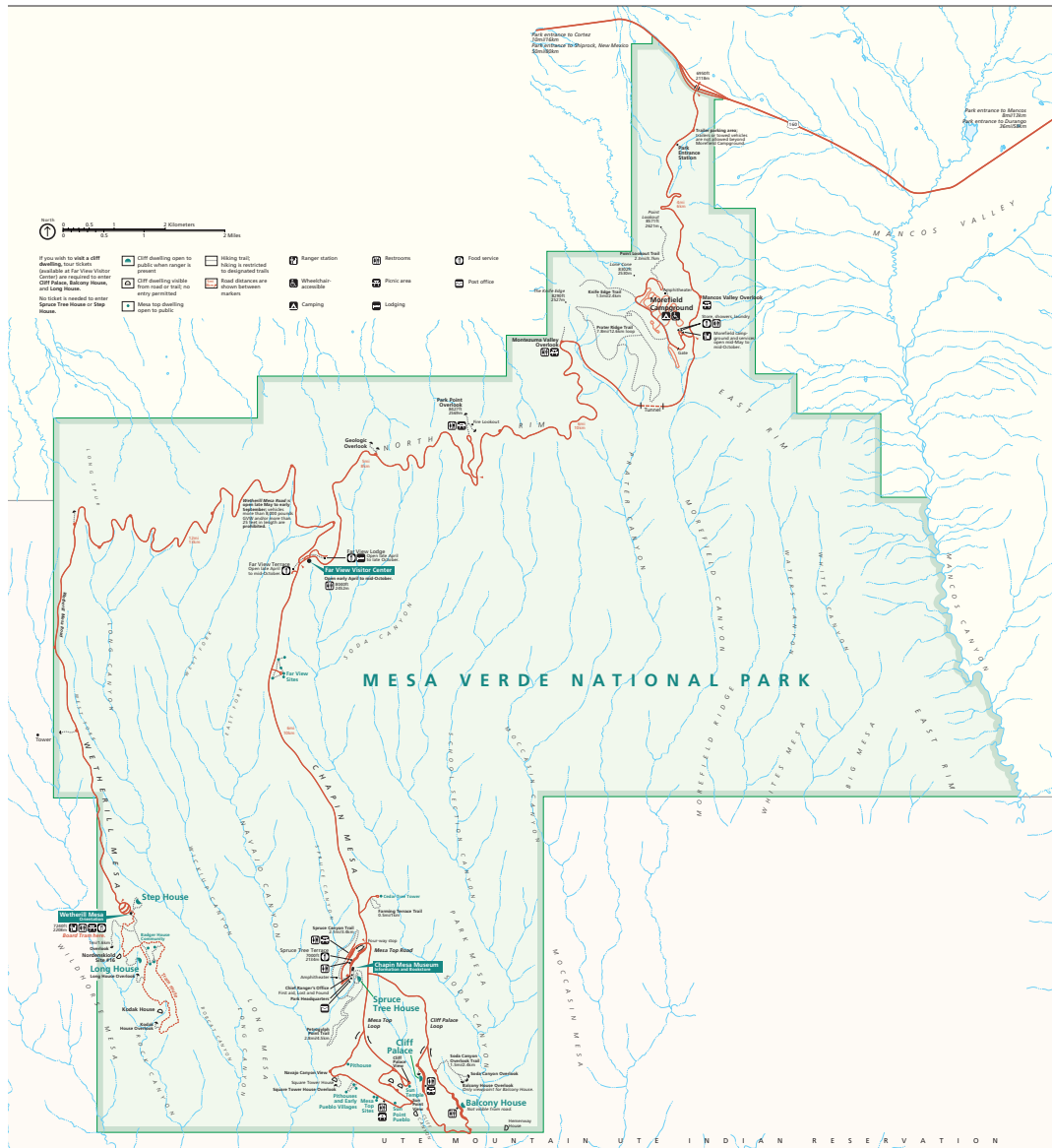
Late in the day, as you leave Mesa Verde you may witness spectacular sunsets.



Bottom: Longhouse

You really do have to take your time to get the full measure of the accomplishment of the native people who lived here so long ago and built these communal dwellings. When one stops and thinks about the logistics of bringing in food and other supplies and disposal of waste you start to realize how clever these people really were.





To really take in Mesa Verde requires more than a day. From the park entrance to the visitors center is approximately 15 miles. It's a spectacular ride on a narrow two-lane road along the north ridge that brings you up from the valley floor (around 5,000 feet) to the top of the mesa. The scenery is awesome and on a clear day you can see for 40 to 50-miles — it's worth the trip alone. However, from the visitors center to take in the sites along both loops is easily another 25 miles (at 25 mph).



Mesa Verde National Park encompasses an area of approximately 60 square miles. It is open year-round, but some attractions are not accessible during the winter. Snow can begin in early October and last well into May. We have visited the park three times, twice in the later half of September and once in early August. Believe me, it's better in the fall —

more wildlife, less tourists and more temperate weather.

Where to stay: Less than 10 miles west of the park entrance along route 160 is the city of Cortez, and approximately 35 miles east is the larger city of Durango. Both cities have loads of motels, hotels and restaurants, although Durango is more upscale.



We found Cortez an ideal place to make base camp in order to explore the region. Within a 250-mile radius, you'll find Mesa Verde (CO), Chaco Canyon (NM), Canyon De Shelly (AZ), Monument Valley and Hovenweep (UT) and much, much more. 38 miles southwest of Cortez is 'four corners', the only place in the US common to four states — Utah, Arizona, Colorado & New Mexico.

Should you opt to make Durango your base, consider taking the narrow gauge train up to Silverton — a fantastic trip. Just make sure to book tickets well ahead and if you value your camera, don't ride in the open cars. The engines are original coal-fired and the smoke is simply awesome.

