

The Ancestral Puebloans

THE HAUNTINGLY BEAUTIFUL and elaborate ruins left behind by the Ancestral Puebloan people are a key factor in the hold that this prehistoric culture has over the public imagination. Also known as "Anasazi," a name coined by the Navajo meaning "Ancient Enemy Ancestor," today they are more accurately known as the Ancestral Puebloan people, and are seen as the ancestors of today's Pueblo peoples.

The first Ancestral Puebloans (see p38) are thought to have settled at Mesa Verde in around AD 550, where they lived in pithouses. By around AD 800 they had developed masonry skills and began building housing complexes using sandstone. From AD 1100 to 1300, impressive levels of craftsmanship were reached in weaving, pottery, jewelry, and tool-making.



Ceramics, such as this bowl, show the artistry of the Ancestral Puebloans. Pottery is just one of many ancient artifacts on show in southwestern museums.



The kiva was the religious and ceremonial center of Ancestral Puebloan life. Still used by modern Pueblo Indians today, a kiva usually had no windows and the only access was through a hole in the roof. Small kivas were used by a single family unit, while large kivas were designed to accommodate the whole community.

WHERE TO FIND ANCESTRAL PUEBLOAN RUINS

Canyon de Chelly National Monument (see p168); Chaco Culture National Historical Park (see p174); Mesa Verde National Park (see page 180); Navajo National Monument, (see p166); Hovenweep National Monument (see p172).



Kivas are round pit-like rooms dug into the ground and roofed with beams and earth.

Jackson Stairway in Chaco Canyon is evidence of the engineering skills of the Ancestral Puebloans. They also built networks of roads between their communities and extensive irrigation systems.



Petroglyphs were often used by Ancestral Puebloans as astronomical markers for the different seasons. This one was found at the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona (see p73).



Pueblo Bonito features many examples of the masonry skills used by the Puebloan peoples.



Tools of various types were skillfully shaped from stone, wood, and bone. The Ancestral Puebloans did not work metal, yet they managed to produce such beautiful artifacts as baskets, pottery, and jewelry.

Bone awl

Needle

Drills

The blue corn growing on this Hopi Reservation in Arizona today is a similar plant to that grown by Ancestral Puebloans. They were also skilled at utilizing the medicinal properties of plants, including cottonwood bark, which contains a painkiller.



CHACO CANYON'S PUEBLO BONITO

At Chaco Canyon (see pp174–5) the largest "great house" ever built was Pueblo Bonito with more than 600 rooms and 40 kivas. One current theory is that these structures did not house populations but were, in fact, public buildings for commerce and ceremonial gatherings. The lives of the Ancestral Puebloans were short, barely 35 years, and as harsh as the environment in which they lived. Their diet was poor, and arthritis and dental problems were common. Women often showed signs of osteoporosis or brittle bones as early as their first childbirth.

THE PUEBLO PEOPLE

By AD 1300 the Ancestral Puebloans had abandoned many of their cities and migrated to areas where new centers emerged. Theories on why this occurred include a 50-year drought; the strain that a larger population placed on the desert's limited resources; and a lengthy period of social upheaval, perhaps stimulated by increasing trade with tribes as far away as central Mexico. Most archaeologists agree that the Ancestral Puebloans did not disappear but live on today in Puebloan descendants who trace their origins to Mesa Verde, Chaco, and other sacred ancestral sites.



Painstaking excavation at an Ancestral Puebloan kiva in Chaco Canyon