

The Adventurers' Companion: Pueblo Bonito

Bonito is the centerpiece of Chaco Culture National Historic Park, a park celebrating the Anasazi's accomplishments. None of the other storied Anasazi sites come close to matching the size, grandeur, or romance of the Anasazi's building here.

In comparison, Canyon de Chelly was a remote backwater, Hovenweep a collection of farmsteads, and Mesa Verde a cluster of villages. Chaco Canyon was a state that rivaled European kingdoms of its era. Consisting of at least fourteen great pueblos and countless small villages all linked together by well-defined roads, Chaco Canyon was the leader in social, agricultural, and architectural development.

Pueblo Bonito was the center of it all. Rising five stories tall and containing between 650 and 800 rooms, Pueblo Bonito was the core of an urban metropolis unlike anything else in North America. Revered by the ancients, venerated by their descendents, and acclaimed by modern scholars, Pueblo Bonito was the site of the Anasazi's greatest accomplishments and, perhaps, the fallible lynch pin whose abandonment presaged the collapse of the entire society.

From the parking area, follow the trail toward Pueblo Bonito and make your first stop at the sign describing the structure.

The artist's rendering is consistent with recent research and may stimulate your imagination. While you are at the sign, take a moment to look at the landscape around you. Today you see an arid valley scarred by the deep wash in the center. Things would have looked far different if you had visited during Chaco's heyday.

Chaco reached its zenith around 1130, and archeologists refer to the preceding century (1030-1130) as Chaco's Golden Century. During that era, you would be standing in the middle of "Downtown Chaco," a fully developed area bounded by Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl to the east, and Casa Rinconada on the south.

The east side of Pueblo Bonito blended into a series of small terraces with adobe plastered surfaces, and both the buildings and the terraces would have glowed with a beautiful golden light in the morning sun.

Now, look at the cliff face between Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl. Notice that the surface is smooth and that there is no rubble at the base. You are looking at the remains of an enormous man-made amphitheater. We will say more about this feature at the end of our tour.

Finally, the land would have looked far different. Where there is a wash and dry scrub today, the Anasazi maintained well tended farm fields. Planted with corn, squash, and beans, the fields were a lush green in the spring and turned a golden brown as the harvest neared. At other times of the year, reddish earth, stone boundaries, and irrigation channels would have been visible.

When you have had your fill, continue up the path toward the pueblo. Stop at the large boulder near the southeastern corner of the structure and read the bronze plaque.