



How to Spend One Day at Mesa Verde National Park

Stay at Far View Lodge

Many visitors underestimate the size of Mesa Verde, it's about a 45-minute drive from the park entrance to the main dwellings.

I recommend staying at [Far View Lodge](#), the only lodging located within the park. It's about a 15-minute drive to the main sites from the lodge, so you can get an early start to beat the crowds and the heat. You can also camp at [Morefield Campground](#) near the park entrance.

The rooms are basic but the setting is peaceful and serene. There is no TV, the wifi is unreliable, and the cell service is spotty, so bring some card games and just enjoy spending time together.

You'll find an onsite restaurant and cafe, some of the only places to eat in the park so plan accordingly. The restaurant is open until 9 pm in the summer.

Start Your Day at the Mesa Verde Museum

The Mesa Verde Museum is a great starting point for your visit to Mesa Verde National Park. The museum is housed in an old sandstone building constructed in 1922 and is considered one of the oldest museums in the National Park Service.

The museum provides a comprehensive overview of the history and culture of the Ancestral Puebloans through a variety of exhibits and displays.

You'll find artifacts such as pottery, tools, and textiles. We were all fascinated by the "chew bread" which was formed by chewing corn until it was ground into meal and formed a stiff batter!

There is also an orientation film at the museum that offers some insight into the history of Mesa Verde and is a great intro before visiting the park. If you like souvenirs, the museum gift

shop is the best place to go. My son chose binoculars which came in handy for spotting cliffside dwellings!

Ranger presentations are held throughout the day just outside the museum and I recommend planning your visit around the schedule. They are highly informative and even kept the attention of our kids.

See the Spruce Tree House Dwelling

The Spruce Tree House dates back to 1200-1275 and is the third largest and one of the most well-preserved cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde National Park.

This dwelling contains about 114 rooms (some of which are three stories tall) and 8 ceremonial chambers known as kivas. It is tucked into a natural alcove and stretches about 216 feet in length.

It is estimated that around 60 to 80 people once lived here. The site is named for a large Douglas Spruce that once grew in front of the dwelling.

The Spruce Tree House is located just behind the museum where you'll find a short trail leading down to an overlook. Visitors are no longer permitted to enter the cliff dwelling as it is closed indefinitely due to rock falls.

The 2.4-mile Spruce Canyon Trailhead is also found here if you want to explore the bottom of the canyon.

Drive the Mesa Top Loop Road

There are two main areas of the park where you'll find the highest concentration of dwellings, this includes Chapin Mesa and Wetherill Mesa.

The most popular archaeological sites are found at Chapin Mesa. The access road through Chapin Mesa is also open all year round, whereas Wetherill Mesa is closed in the winter.

The Mesa Top Loop Road is the most popular drive on the Chapin Mesa plateau. This one-way 6-mile loop has 11 different archeological sites like pithouses, pueblos, and cliff dwellings.

I recommend downloading the [Mesa Top Loop Drive audio tour](#) to make the most of your experience. Listed below are a few of the highlights along the Mesa Loop Drive. See the [NPS website](#) for an extensive list of each site on the Mesa Top Loop Drive.

Pithouses

One of the first stops you'll come to is the pithouses. These are the earliest permanent dwellings found on the mesa.

The Ancestral Pueblo were a nomadic people until around 550 AD when they started settling down and building permanent homes, farmsteads, and villages.

The pithouses were built partially underground so that the earth would provide natural insulation from the often extreme weather found in the high desert.

Visitors can see the remains of the pithouses and find informational panels with illustrations of what the pithouses once looked like.

Navajo Canyon Overlook

The Navajo Canyon Overlook allows you to take in the vastness of the region. From this vantage point, you can see for miles across the surrounding mesas and down into the canyon.

You can see why the area is called Mesa Verde, meaning the "green table". I was surprised at how green it is and was even more surprised to learn that there are over 1,000 species of plants and animals thriving here. This provided ideal living conditions for the Ancestral Pueblo and allowed them to thrive here for so many years.

For seven centuries, villages were spread across the mesas and dwellings were built into natural alcoves in the surrounding cliffs. At its peak, approximately 5,000 people lived here. If you bring binoculars, you can spot dwellings constructed within the canyon walls, including Echo House.

Square Tower House

Square Tower House was built about six hundred years after the first permanent pithouses and it is amazing to see how their architectural achievements have advanced over time.

Square Tower House is a four-story structure that stands 27 feet tall and is considered the tallest dwelling in Mesa Verde. It is part of a larger complex that boasts around 60 rooms and 8 kivas that served as the center of the community.

This dwelling has been well preserved due to the protective alcove and arid climate, however, the site has also undergone stabilization and preservation projects over the years.

Visitors can take a [guided tour](#) of Square Tower House to see the painted murals, pecked rock art, original wood beams, and hand-plastered walls that can't be seen from the lookout.

Mesa Top Sites

The Mesa Top Sites include the remains of three distinct villages built on top of each other about 100 years apart.

It's fascinating to see how their techniques changed and improved with each subsequent village as they built on the wisdom of generations before them.

It can be hard to distinguish between the different ruins, but there are informational signs that point out what you are seeing.

The first village was constructed around 900 AD and consisted of simple single-story rooms built with a wooden framework and mud plaster.

The second village was built around 1000 AD and you can see that stones were shaped into blocks to build sturdy walls.

The third village was built around 1075 AD. Their masonry skills had advanced and this final village included structures built with two layers of stone bricks. This allowed them to construct multi-level structures.

As you enter the covered structure, you can view remnants from all three villages, including the remains of three circular towers and a large kiva that belonged to the last village built here.

Over 105 towers were built in Mesa Verde and it is believed that they were used to communicate with other villages, observe astronomy, stand as a watch tower, or they were used for ceremonial purposes.

Fire Temple & New Fire House

From the overlook, you can view the Fire Temple and New Fire House across the canyon.

The Fire Temple is unique as it is one of only a few archaeological sites in Mesa Verde that has a large open plaza.

Unlike other structures, the Fire Temple wasn't used for domestic activities. The large plaza is believed to have been used for dancing and public ceremonies. Similar plazas can be found in modern-day Pueblo communities and are used for feast days and dancing.

The New Fire House is a small cliff dwelling to the right of the Fire Temple. This 22-room dwelling was possibly the home of the Fire Temple caretakers.

Sun Temple

To this day, mystery surrounds the Sun Temple. There is no other structure like this in Mesa Verde or at other surrounding Pueblo sites.

The massive D-shaped structure has 4-foot thick walls, 24 different rooms, no roof, very few doors, and no evidence of domestic activities.

It likely played an integral role in the surrounding community, possibly as a social gathering place, a place for ceremonial rituals, or maybe it was used for astronomical observations.

Tour Cliff Palace

After driving the Mesa Top Loop Road, head over to the Cliff Palace Loop Road where you'll find some of the most famous dwellings in Mesa Verde.

Cliff Palace is the first archeological site that you'll come to and it is also the most iconic one in the park. Not only is Cliff Palace the largest cliff dwelling in Mesa Verde, but it is the largest in all of North America.

This massive structure consists of 150 rooms and 21 kivas. It was built around 1200-1275 and was inhabited for about 100 years.

There is a lookout point for Cliff Palace along the Mesa Top Loop Road, but you can get a closer look from the lookout point that is found on the Cliff Palace Loop Road. I recommend skipping the Mesa Top Loop Road lookout point and just going to the one on Cliff Palace Loop Road instead.

Cliff Palace is one of only 3 cliff dwellings in the park open to the public for guided tours. [Tickets](#) are released at 8 am 14 days in advance. This is a popular tour and tickets often sell out within the first hour during peak season, so set an alarm. Tours operate from the beginning of May to the middle of October, check the calendar for exact dates.

Tour Balcony House

Balcony House is also located along the Cliff Palace Loop Road within Soda Canyon. On your way to Balcony House from Cliff Palace, be sure to stop and get Navajo fry bread from the fry bread stand at the Soda Point Lookout!

Unlike many of the other ruins, Balcony House can't be seen from a lookout point. The only way to experience Balcony House is on a [guided tour](#), which I highly recommend!

It has been nicknamed the "Indiana Jones" tour and is the most adventurous tour in Mesa Verde. It involves ladder climbs, steep stone steps on a cliff face, and narrow tunnels leading to an ancient cliff dwelling. If you have physical limitations this might not be the tour for you.

There is no minimum age for the tour, but kids will need to be able to climb the ladder by themselves, the tallest ladder is 32 feet. You are allowed to bring infants in a baby carrier.

The youngest child in our group was 4 years old. He was a little nervous on the ladder so I wouldn't recommend bringing kids younger than 4 years, but use your best judgment.

In addition to a fun adventure, you'll also learn so much about the Ancestral Pueblo people who lived here over 800 years ago.

Just as with the Cliff Palace tour, tickets are released at 8 am 14 days in advance and they go quickly. Tours run from the beginning of May to the middle of October.

Conclusion

Mesa Verde was such a fascinating place to visit, our entire family loved it! It's incredible to witness structures over 1,000 years old and imagine what everyday life was like back then.

Taking a tour of the Balcony House was a highlight and I highly recommend getting tickets. If you plan to tour more than one dwelling, be sure to make reservations at least 2 hours apart.

We felt like one day was enough to see all the main highlights in the park, especially if you stay at Far View Lodge and can get an early start. However, you could easily spend multiple days here if you would like to explore the Wetherill Mesa and other archeological sites scattered throughout the park.

There are very limited places to get food within the park, so pack a picnic lunch and snacks. It also gets quite hot in the summer so bring plenty of water.

Cell service is very limited within the park, so download the map from the NPS app to use offline. You'll also want to make sure you gas up before entering the park.

I hope this guide helps you discover the best things to do in Mesa Verde National Park, enjoy your trip!