



Puye Cliff Dwellings Walking Tour Brochure

A project of the Santa Clara Indian Pueblo

PO Box 580
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WELCOME TO PUYE!



For more than three centuries—about A.D. 1250 to 1577—this spectacular locale was home for over 1500 Pueblo Indians who built villages, dwelled, farmed, and hunted game here. The traditions of the people of the Pueblo of Santa Clara (located 10 miles east of Puye) state that their ancestors were the inhabitants of this area, only leaving it when drought caused springs to dry up and crops to fail. In the Tewa language, the name “Puye” translates as “pueblo ruin where the rabbits assemble or meet.” Puye Cliff Dwellings is a National Landmark and is owned and operated as a cultural monument by the Pueblo of Santa Clara.

Two separate self-guided tours are described in the pamphlet.

The Cliff Trail—begins at the Visitor Center and leads you up moderately steep trails and ladders past many of the ancient dwellings built along and into the cliffs. Prehistoric stairways link the two levels of cliff dwellings to the mesa top and its great “Community House”. For those who prefer not to climb, a short drive to the mesa top will bring you directly to the ruins.

The Mesa-Top Trail—follow the graded road past the Visitor Center and continue to the parking area on the mesa top. There, the ground is generally level and you can visit the 740-room pueblo ruin and its restored ceremonial chamber. The views of the northern Rio Grande region are spectacular. Some space is available for picnicking.

The Cliff-Dwelling Trails

CAUTION! The elevation here is about 6900 feet above sea level, and over 7000 feet at the top of the mesa. The trail to the top is steep; the air is thinner. As you climb, rest frequently and catch your breath.

Please do not climb or walk on the walls of the ruins. Keep the trails clean for the next visitor. Do not litter. If you see trash on the ground, please pick it up and deposit it in a trash can.

THE CLIFF TRAIL

SITE #1 Volcanic Tuff

Between 1.1 to 1.4 million years ago an enormous volcano, the Valles Caldera, erupted and spewed out huge masses of lava and ash that formed the successive layers of black basalt and volcanic tuff of the Jemez Mountains. Subsequent erosion by rain, snow, wind, and freezing and thawing carved through the tuff to form the sheer cliffs that border the canyons draining the mountains.

SITE #2 Cavate (cave-like) Rooms

Take a rest here, if you haven't done so already.

Weathering of the surface of the tuff cliffs develops a somewhat hard patina, but it is easily broken through, and the underlying tuff is soft and crumbly and can be dug away using stone and even wood tools—the implements that the prehistoric Indians must have used to make the caves. All of the rooms would have had level floors of well-smoothed adobe clay. The very deep “channels” evident in the floors of some rooms have been formed by the feet of thousands of visitors to the ruins in the last 100 years.

Cavate rooms extend for over a mile along the south face of Puye mesa, sometimes at two separate levels.

SITE #3 A Cavate/Talus Room Group

[There is more to be seen than simply caves carved into bedrock. As you walk the trails, note the manner of the construction of the cavates. Watch for evidence of the tops of masonry walls in the trail areas in front of the caves. Scan the cliffs for glimpses of petroglyphs (pictures carved on the rock).]

At your feet, alignments of shaped blocks of tuff show the outlines of buried masonry dwellings (talus rooms) that were built on projecting ledges or fallen rocks. These indicate that most cavate rooms were simply the very back rooms of dwellings built against the face of the cliffs (see the reconstructed rooms to your right beside the ladder). Here, and at many locations along the cliffs, the former existence of talus rooms is also indicated by horizontal rows of holes into which timbers for roofs or floors were inserted. Take the trail to the left to **Site #4**.



SITE #4 Petroglyphs

Watch for petroglyphs—inscriptions in the rock! Many are high up because the Indians who made them were able to stand on the floors and roof tops of multi-storied talus rooms.

Concentric circles, spirals, animals, human figures, masks, and a horned or plumed serpent (above the reconstructed rooms) can be seen along this part of the cliffs.

Return the same route you came, go past **Site #5**.

SITE #5 Hazards of Living in Cavate Rooms

The ceilings of most of the cavate rooms show the marks of digging sticks used to cut away the soft tuff bedrock. Smokey fires for heat and light caused soot to accumulate on the walls and ceilings, often indicating that the upper part of the room was frequently filled with smoke. Floor vents were built to bring fresh air into the rooms, and ceiling vents helped to disperse the smoke, but prolonged use of the rooms would certainly not have been healthy.

Even today, fractures in the tuff bedrock allow water from rain and melting snow to percolate into the cavate rooms. Freezing of such water exerts pressure on the rock, causing sections of the cliffs to collapse, particularly in areas where the cliffs have been weakened by the digging of the cavate rooms. Lives may have been lost in such instances, perhaps often enough to cause the Indians to abandon the talus and cavate rooms entirely.

SITE #6 Stairways

Over a dozen stairways link the great Community House on the mesa top to the talus and cavate rooms and the land below. Stairs lead downward in various directions, including many to the north—the direction toward Santa Clara Canyon and water. The stairs are not formal steps, but convenient stepping places that have been intentionally cut and worn into the cliffs—often accompanied by finger grips to make climbing the stairs easier.

Climb the ladder and stairway to the upper trail.

SITE #7 Talus Kiva

At least two subterranean ceremonial chambers—kivas—have been found in the talus areas at the base of the cliffs. This one has large sockets cut into the cliff to hold heavy roof timbers needed to span such a large room.

THE MESA-TOP TRAIL



SITE #8 Community House

The Community House is constructed of shaped blocks of volcanic tuff quarried from the edges of the mesa top. With its enclosed plaza, it may have served a somewhat defensive function, though the broad passage at the southeast corner would seem to negate this. Information obtained at the time of excavation indicates that portions of the structure were two or three stories high. Entrances to rooms from ground or roof level may have been via a ladder, with room-to-room correspondences as well. Pueblos are very often compared to modern apartment houses, and that comparison is appropriate at Puye.

The Pajarito Plateau

Beginning in the late 1100s, the upland mesas flanking the east side of the Jemez Mountains were settled by people of the Anasazi Culture. At first there were hundreds of individual, family-size dwellings, but by A.D. 1300, the people were converging on relatively few principal villages which grew to considerable size. Such villages included Puye, Tsankawi, Tyuonyi, Otowi, Shufinne, and Tsirege. The latter village, Tsirege, means "little bird" in the Tewa language. Archaeologist, Edgar L. Hewett adopted the name, but translated it into Spanish—Pajarito—and applied it as the general name for the great area of prehistoric settlement around the eastern flanks of the Jemez Mountains, i.e., the Pajarito Plateau.

Facts:

How many people lived here?	1440
When was the site excavated?	1907
What language did they speak?	Tewa
What was the source of livelihood?	Farming
When was Puye first inhabited?	The late 1100s
When was Puye finally abandoned?	c. 1580

With admission to the Santa Clara Indian Reservation, including the Puye Cliff Dwellings, the visitor hereby releases the Santa Clara Pueblo and holds them harmless from any and all liability that may arise in connection with any and all forms of accidents or mishaps, whether naturally caused or otherwise, that may occur while visiting the reservation and its environs.

Donations for restoration of this area
can be made payable to:

Santa Clara Pueblo
c/o The Governor's Office
PO Box 580
Espanola, New Mexico 87532
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