

during the 13th century. We also experience centuries-old challenges: dry, hot weather and rugged terrain. Even in spring and fall—the best times to visit the Four Corners area—the sun is intense. We carry plenty of water and shade ourselves with hats, sunglasses, and long shirts and pants.

On our recent trip, Ken and I made the Best Western Turquoise Inn and Suites in Cortez our home base for day trips to explore selected highlights on the Trail of the Ancients. With abundant restaurants and motels, Cortez is a perfect portal for our journey back in time.

Day One: Canyons of the Ancients/Hovenweep Loop

For a full day (8:30 to 6:00) that mixes scenic driving with short hikes and exploration of ruins, we follow part of the Trail of the Ancients on a loop that starts and ends in Cortez. There's little gas or food along the way, so pack a picnic lunch.

Stop 1: Anasazi Heritage Center

We depart Cortez early enough to arrive at the Anasazi Heritage Center at its 9 a.m. opening time. The museum is first-rate, and we marvel at beautifully preserved examples of 900-year-old Ancestral

Canyons of the Ancients

By Laurel Kallenbach

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Mesa Verde National Park's ancient cliff dwellings first ignited my imagination at age five. Stories about ceremonial, subterranean, circular rooms called kivas inspired my zeal for archaeology, especially of the Anasazi (Ancestral Pueblo) people, who thrived in the Southwest's canyons and plateaus from about 600 to 1300 A.D. To me, the park was the coolest place in the world.

Four decades later, Mesa Verde still enchants me, but I've expanded my horizons to include other nearby archaeological treasures along the 114-mile Trail of the Ancients, a National Scenic Byway that runs through Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico. The Colorado section of the route boasts two National Monuments—Canyons of the Ancients and Hovenweep—and the Ute Mountain Tribal Park.

Less visited than Mesa Verde, these destinations are like time machines. Despite the modern roads, my husband Ken and I easily envision this arid land

Pueblo pottery.

The emphasis here is on preserving archaeological sites: Don't eat near the ruins or climb on them, never disturb or remove bits of pottery, and stay on paths. "We like to connect the past to the future and add a human touch to archaeology," says Victoria Atkins, the Anasazi Heritage Center's interpretive specialist. A 10-minute film explains how ancient ruins are sacred to modern tribes. The Hopi, Zuni and Acoma people ask the ancestral spirits' permission before entering and offer thanks when they leave.

Ken and I get our first chance to greet the ancestors at Escalante Pueblo, located on the hill above the Anasazi Heritage Center. From this lookout, we survey the rocky profile of Sleeping Ute Mountain, a range of peaks resembling a fallen warrior—arms crossed over his chest—who wears different blankets each season: white in winter, green in spring and summer, and gold in fall.

Stop 2: Lowry Pueblo

Next, we drive northwest on Highway 491, where pinto and Anasazi bean fields line the road. Anasazi beans are an heirloom variety believed to date back to the ancients. At Pleasant View, we follow Road CC 9 miles west (on asphalt and gravel) to Lowry Pueblo, just one of Canyons of the Ancients' multitude of archaeological sites.

This modest settlement was home to about 40 people in the late 1100s, and the stabilized masonry walls mark small rooms. Lowry has one of the region's largest kivas—47 feet in diameter—with floor stones laid in a decorative pattern.

Stop 3: Painted Hand Pueblo

After a short backtrack on Road CC, we turn south on Road 10 and drive 11.3 miles to the turnoff to Painted Hand Pueblo. After bumping a mile down the dirt road, we find the trailhead leading to a 13th-century tower gracefully perched over the canyon. The first part of the quarter-mile hike is easy, leading through piñon and juniper forest. Scrambling down the banded sandstone to reach the tower's base is more challenging. There, Ken points out the faint shape of three white hands painted on rock. The lonely call of a hawk makes me wonder about the long-ago artist who left handprints in this peaceful valley.

Stop 4: Hovenweep National Monument

Continuing south on the well-paved Road 10 to Hovenweep National Monument, we enjoy 10 scenic miles of arroyos and mesas blanketed with sage and rabbit brush. We picnic at Hovenweep's Visitor Center, which straddles the Colorado/Utah border, before taking the enchanting two-mile trail through Little Ruin Canyon. Filled with square, round and even twin towers—along with assorted buildings, storerooms and a "castle"—this narrow canyon must have been a 13th-century Southwestern Manhattan.

Like most of the Ancestral Puebloans' impressive architecture, Hovenweep's dwellings were abandoned just one or two generations after they were built. Drought and deforestation probably factored into the people's departure for the south.

Stop 5: Sand Canyon

We too continue south—from Hovenweep to Road G, which winds east along McElmo Creek for 15 desolate miles before becoming lush—in a deserty way, that is. Just when we decide we're done for the day, a massive sandstone formation rises out of the prickly pear cactus and Mormon-tea bushes to announce the entrance to Sand Canyon.

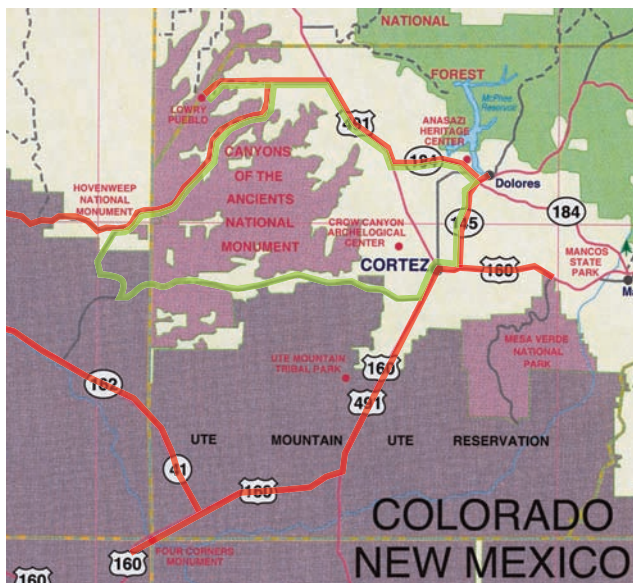
Re-energized, Ken and I amble along part of the slick-rock trail, which is open to hiking, horseback riding or mountain biking. The six-mile (one-way)

path leads through the canyon past several cliff dwellings, but it's definitely a trek for another day. Reluctantly, we leave this rock palace and return to Cortez for a well-deserved dinner at Nero's Restaurant on West Main.

Day Two: Ute Mountain Tribal Park

Just a half-hour drive south of Cortez is the Ute Mountain Reservation's Tribal Park, an area of gorgeous mesas and buttes. The tribe preserves the park

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For a more detailed map, visit a AAA office and ask for the Indian Country Guide Map, or go to www.encompassmag.com for a PDF of the tour route.

■ Mini Tour route ■ Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway

If you go

Anasazi Heritage Center: Open 9 a.m.–5 p.m. March through October; 10 a.m.–4 p.m. November through February. \$3 for adults; 17 and under free. 970-882-5600, www.co.blm.gov/ahc

Canyons of the Ancients: No fee, no campgrounds. Primitive roadside camping is allowed. www.co.blm.gov/canm

Hovenweep National Monument: \$7 per vehicle entry fee. Camping: \$10 per night. 970-562-4282, www.nps.gov/hove

Mesa Verde National Park: \$15 per vehicle entry fee. 970-529-4465, www.nps.gov/meve; 800-449-2288, www.visitmesaverde.com

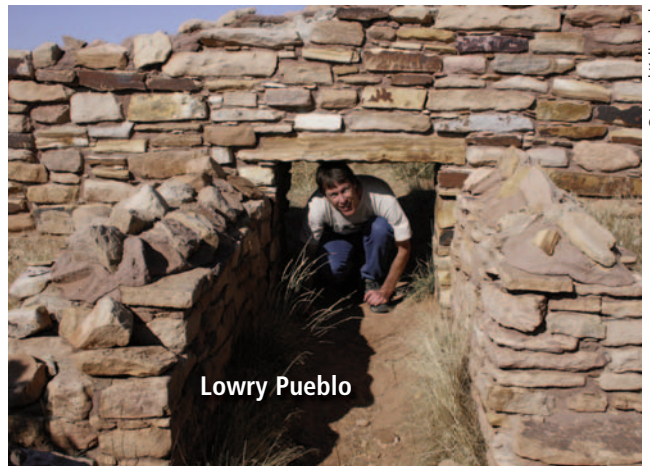
Ute Mountain Tribal Park: Full-day tour: \$45 per person. Half-day tour: \$27 per person. 800-847-5485, www.utemountainute.com/tribalpark.htm

by restricting visitors to guided trips, offering a half-day tour that involves short walks and a full-day adventure that requires climbing log ladders to cliff dwellings.

Our Ute guide for the full-day excursion is Marshall Deer, whom we meet at the park headquarters in a defunct gas station at the intersection of Highways 160 and 491. Ken and I ride through the park with Marshall in his van (there's an extra fee for this) rather than opting for the self-drive caravan.

Marshall has studied archaeology and is a master storyteller who blends Ute sagas with Pueblo mythology and the escapades of the Wetherill brothers, 19th-century ranchers who explored the area's cliff dwellings. As Marshall points out various petroglyphs (rock art), the lines between the ancient, the merely old, and the relatively new blur. There's mythological Kokopelli playing his flute, 1915-era rock paintings depicting Ute warriors and U.S. soldiers on horseback, and 1960s political protest art. Here, the past is the present.

After our brown-bag lunch, our group descends the rock face of a canyon via a series of ladders. Some climbs are easy, others nerve-wracking, especially the steep climb to Eagle's Nest cliff dwelling. "They nicknamed John Wetherill 'the human plumb-bob,'" Marshall says. "He dangled on a rope from



these cliffs to get here." Suddenly I'm exceedingly thankful for the ladders. And, as I marvel at two-story stone buildings tucked into the rocky alcoves, I realize that a little vertigo is worth the rare opportunity to glimpse ruins nearly untouched for centuries.

Ken and I return from the Ute Tribal Park with admiration for the long-distant past and appreciation for Southwestern native peoples. And the best part is knowing there's an entire magical world just beyond Mesa Verde. ■

Laurel Kallenbach is a freelance travel writer and editor who lives and writes from Boulder.

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dawn to their subterranean roosts.

To watch the nightly bat flight, plan to arrive at the outdoor amphitheater adjacent to the Visitor Center about a half-hour before dusk, where rangers do a presentation on bats and their ecological importance. It is a magical moment as 500,000 to 700,000 bats pour from the caverns. Needless to say, this free nightly event helps pack 'em in at the amphitheater. Unfortunately, cameras and videos are not allowed, as the electronics are thought to be harmful to the bats' sensitive hearing and the flashes disorient them.

Although Carlsbad sits at the northern fringes of the great Chihuahuan Desert, there's a dramatic chunk of mountain wilderness less than an hour's drive southwest of the city on NM 137. The Guadalupe Mountains, which rise to more than 5,000 feet, offer some spectacular sightseeing and hiking. A popular side trip leads to Sitting Bull Falls, located seven miles southwest of NM 137 on Forest Route 276. Hidden in a rugged ravine, this 130-foot cataract is one of the tallest in the state.

Not to be missed during any visit to the Carlsbad area is Living Desert Zoological and Botanical State Park. Often cited as New Mexico's finest state park, it sprawls across a hillside overlooking Carlsbad and the Pecos River Valley and offers a fascinating introduction to the flora, fauna and geology of the

Chihuahuan Desert.

A 1.3-mile self-guided trail leads through sand dunes and cactus, arroyos and piñon/juniper forest. More than 40 species of native wildlife, ranging from prairie dogs to bison and mountain lions to endangered Mexican wolves roam large compounds. An aviary houses hawks, eagles, owls, wild turkeys and, of course, New Mexico's goofy state bird, the road runner. The botanical side of desert life is well represented, too, by grounds sporting cholla, yucca, agave and prickly pear. In a giant greenhouse, you can peruse cacti and succulents from some of the world's other deserts.

It's a place that goes to show there's more to Carlsbad than just its famous caverns. ■

Dave Houser is a freelance writer and photographer based in Nogal, New Mexico.

Find out more

Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce: 575-887-6516, www.caverns.com/~chamber/

Carlsbad Caverns National Park: 575-785-2232, www.nps.gov/cave. Reservations for cave tours, 800-967-2283.

Living Desert State Park: 575-887-5516, www.nmparks.com

➤ **Web extra:** See more photos of Carlsbad Caverns at www.encompassmag.com.