

## Travel

# Southwest Colorado has a rich archeological past

By **MELODY WREN**  
Special to *The CJN*

Often when I'm in a foreign place, I entertain the notion of actually living there. I have flirted with the idea in Florence, London and Paris after staying a few weeks or months, but after only a few days in southwest Colorado, already I was imagining a life there.

I was so taken by the beauty of the natural landscape, as well as the natural beauty of the people. The people are relaxed, and the towns have a positive energy. Locals who moved there from other states told me they were never happier than when they moved to Colorado. I could see within a day of being there that there was something special about this place.

Cortez, Colo., is known as the archeological centre of America. It is home to Mesa Verde National Park, Hovenweep National Monument and Canyons of the Ancients Monument.

Cortez is the ideal jumping-off point for many adventures in the Four Corners area. The Four Corners encompass Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico.

The Colorado Tourism Office is encouraging tourists to "Touch the Past, Touch the Plenty." For tourists, this means exploring the rich archeological past of the area and agri-tourism. Many tourists visit the area to explore Mesa Verde National Park, but end up staying longer than they expected once they discover there is so much more to see and do. Southwest Colorado is an ideal place for hikers, bicyclers and birders.

Visits to the following places are recommended.

**Mesa Verde National Park:** This must-see national park brings tourists to the area yearly. With an elevation of 8,250 feet, there are staggering views at every turn.

A ranger can take you on a guided hike to Balcony House, a 13th-century cliff dwelling, and one of the best preserved sites in the park. Balcony House has a stunning view into Soda Canyon.

Access to Balcony House is by a 32-foot ladder. Getting there includes a 60-foot climb up a cliff face on steps carved into the cliff and then ascending another ladder near the top. The high elevation makes the climbing somewhat strenuous. This tour is not for those who fear heights.

The builders of Balcony House were people now known as Ancestral Puebloans. It was

constructed intermittently between 1180 and 1270. Though Balcony House now feels isolated and remote, in the 13th century, it was part of a larger community. Eleven small sites have been counted in the vicinity of Balcony House, and many significant larger ones are within easy walking distance.



**The Canyons of the Ancients**

Cliff Palace, the crown jewel of Mesa Verde National Park, is the largest cliff dwelling in North America. It is about a half mile away from Balcony House. Eight hundred years ago, the dwelling was bustling with human activity. The collection of rooms, plazas and towers fits perfectly into the sweeping sandstone overhang that has largely protected Cliff Palace, uninhabited and silent since the 13th century.

**Hovenweep National Monument:** Forty-two miles from Cortez, and part of the Colorado plateau, this site gets few visitors as it is so remote, but it's definitely worth a visit. Hovenweep preserves a brief chapter of Ancestral Puebloan history. Hike around the six

groupings of high towers that date from the mid-13th century and stand like sentries on canyon rims guarding precious spring waters. Plains covered by sage hide what was once 20 square miles of farms and fields that were cultivated by early inhabitants. Rubble and rock falls now cover much of their first homes. It is an amazingly peaceful site to visit.

**Canyons of the Ancients:** This is a delicate checkerboard of ancient sites scattered across 164,000 acres of high desert. This area was the epicentre of Ancestral Puebloan communities. The gigantic monument is a difficult place to navigate, and there are only a few areas for the public to explore ([www.co.blm.gov/canm](http://www.co.blm.gov/canm)).

**East Pines Ranch, Dove Creek:** Saddle up for the day and

participate in an authentic cattle drive on a 9,600-acre beef ranch owned by Al and LaVonne Heaton. Not far from the ranch is the lookout point at Dolores Canyon, with the Dolores River at the bottom. This little-known location has stunning views. Call 970-565-6439 or visit [www.eastpines.com](http://www.eastpines.com).

**Cortez Farmers Market:** Shop for turquoise and silver jewelry made by local Navajos or buy dried gourds with petroglyph tracings at the Cortez Farmers Market held on Main Street every Saturday morning. If you miss the market, go to Notah Dineh Trading Company, 345 W. Main St., Cortez. Beautiful hand woven rugs and baskets are available. [www.cortezfarm-market.com](http://www.cortezfarm-market.com)

#### Where to stay:

**Far View Lodge:** The lodge is located in Mesa Verde National Park. Stay for a night or more and explore the park with a ranger-guided tour during the day. If you do stay, be prepared to acclimatize yourself to the high elevation.

**Canyons of the Ancients Guest Ranch:** Gary and Ming own this 2,000-acre working ranch, which has three guest cottages featuring stone showers, log walls, authentically tasteful southwestern décor. Vegetables from the garden and free-range eggs are available at mealtimes. The petroglyph tour of the property is recommended. 7986 Road G., Cortez, 970-565-4288, [www.canyonoftheancients.com](http://www.canyonoftheancients.com)

**Cortez Best Western Turquoise Inn:** Centrally located, it offers great value. 535 E. Main St., Cortez. Call 970-565-3778

For more information, visit the Colorado Tourism Office's website at [www.colorado.com](http://www.colorado.com) and [www.mesaverde-country.com](http://www.mesaverde-country.com)

*Wren's trip was sponsored by the Mesa Verde County Board of Tourism, Cortez, Colo.*



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