



Balcony House, Mesa Verde National Park

YourGuides Tour Transcript

Meet Your Guide

Hello, my name is Drew and I am a park ranger at Mesa Verde National Park.

Together, we are about to explore an incredible place called Balcony House, one of the many cliff dwellings built and lived in by the Ancestral Pueblo people here on Mesa Verde around 800 years ago.

How many other places in America can you explore an 800-year-old home!?

Due to its sturdy stone masonry construction and the shelter provided by the natural rock alcove, Balcony House remains remarkably well preserved, providing an incredible window into the past. As we explore ten locations within the site, let's use the physical evidence of what we find to answer some of the big questions you might be asking, such as why did the Ancestral Pueblo people build homes high in the cliffside?

We will also draw on the knowledge of Pueblo people today, the direct descendants of those who built these homes, to gain an even better understanding of what it might have been like to live in Balcony House. Today pueblo people carry on many of the traditions that began right here at Mesa Verde.

It is important to understand that to many Pueblo people, these sites are special places where the presence of their ancestors can be felt. And so, although you're visiting virtually, we still ask that you visit with respect by bringing along a sense of reverence and a willingness to learn something new.

1 – Cliff Dwelling Introduction

While cliff dwellings are the most well-known types of homes found on Mesa Verde, they are not the only type. For hundreds of years the Ancestral Pueblo people lived primarily on the Mesa Top, their stone-built villages surrounded by fields of Corn, Beans, and Squash. Pueblo communities were and still are farming communities.

It wasn't until the 11 and 1200s that cliff dwellings became a popular trend. But why?

In order to get into Balcony House, one must first descend a series of steps carved into the cliff side. These steps are known as hand and footholds. They are found all over the mesa linking cliff dwellings to mesa top villages and farmland.

Once below the canyon rim all who came and went into Balcony House had to pass through this narrow natural rock corridor. This entry was made even smaller by the addition of a tunnel built of stone and wood that further restricted access into the site.

The difficult to reach nature of many cliff dwellings, and the added restriction of access by features like this tunnel, lead some archaeologists to believe that safety and security were one reason some people

moved from the Mesa Top to these alcove villages. Let's keep exploring to find out other reasons cliff dwellings become so popular.

2 – Stone Architecture

The rooms of Balcony house are built primarily of shaped sandstone blocks neatly laid one on top of the other with mud mortar in-between forming single-course masonry walls. Look closely and you can see dimples and peck marks made by the craftspeople who shaped each individual block with stone tools.

Like homes today, these rooms served a variety of purposes, some were living quarters where families slept, cooked and relaxed after a long day of work in the fields, others were used as storage to process and keep food.

Though no longer in their original places, these metates, or grinding stones, were found in this site and were used to grind corn into cornmeal.

Think of all the amazing meals that were prepared and cooked here. Today pueblo families carry on the tradition of making and enjoying a variety of corn dishes, including piki bread, a crisp paper-thin bread made of cornmeal, ash, and water.

3 – Interior Plasters & Designs

Many of these rooms were adorned with interior murals of red, white, green, even blue plasters made from locally found minerals. Designs include human and animal figures and geometric patterns like the red and white triangle design you see here.

Such designs are not just found on the mesa but all around the pueblo world indicating an exchange of ideas throughout the four corners region and beyond.

Art was and remains an important part of pueblo culture. Many highly decorated items, including baskets, ceramics bowls and mugs, cotton clothing and yucca fiber sandals, were found inside cliff dwelling rooms. Today pueblo weavers, potters and craftspeople carry on these traditions.

4 – Dating Balcony House

Let's take a closer look at another room. This one is well preserved. With its defined t-shape doorway and intact roof and floor structure, it provides an excellent example of what many of the other rooms might have once felt like. Step inside and take a look around.

The natural rock ceiling of the alcove has protected the architecture from rain and snow, preserving the site remarkably well, including the wooden beams above you. Perhaps this was another reason why the Ancestral Pueblo people chose to live here.

The intact original wood provides archaeologists with a wealth of information, including a way of dating the site. By taking core samples, scientists look at the rings to find out what year the tree was chopped

down thus providing an approximate date for when the room was built. This science is known as dendrochronology. Tree ring dates tell us that Balcony House was constructed between 1180 to 1270 CE.

5 – Kivas

The two round underground rooms at the center of the site are called Kivas. On the mesa top, this required digging down into the earth. Here in Balcony House the alcove floor is hard sandstone, so digging down was not possible. In order to build a subterranean room, the builders of Balcony House constructed a retaining wall at the front of the site and backfilled it with earth and debris.

Both Kivas would have had flat roofs made of latticed beams with a small square opening in its center that provided entry via a ladder. Look down into the Kiva, can you see where the hearth, or firepit, once was?

Well insulated and warmed by a fire, a kiva would have been a welcoming place. Evidence suggests that kivas at Mesa Verde were used in a variety of ways. Today, Pueblo people build and use kivas for religious dances, ceremonies, celebrations, and as gathering places for the community.

6 – Seep Springs

Today, the back of Balcony House is dark and cool. Look at the alcove ceiling, notice how the natural sandstone ceiling is covered in a film of black soot. This soot is from small fires that once illuminated this space. As you continue to explore this back area, pay close attention to where the ceiling dips down to meet the alcove floor. It might be a bit difficult to see but look for a depression carved into the ground. Water from a seep spring once pooled in this carved out feature. Rain and snowmelt will slowly seep into the sandstone above. Some of it will exit the rock and collect in small springs like this one. In this arid landscape, I can imagine water was a very important resource, just as it is today. Perhaps these springs, located below the canyon's rim, provided yet another reason to live here.

7 – Narrow Passageway

Let's continue our journey through the site.

Balcony House is divided into two main sections each with its own open plaza area.

During the summer season, rangers lead groups of visitors through this site. This narrow passageway used by the Ancestral Pueblo people to go between these two main areas is the route we still use today.

8 - North Plaza

You might be wondering by now... why is Balcony House called Balcony House? Here in the North Plaza, a balcony extends from a two-story structure. Balconies like this one allowed residents to pass from one second-story room to another and provided more usable space.

Many pueblo villages had similar balconies, however this one remains incredibly well preserved.

While we call this village Balcony House, it must have gone by other names in the past. Spanish explorers, ranchers and other visitors long after the Ancestral Pueblo people left the area gave these sites the names we use today.

Pueblo people have different names for these places. Mesa Verde in the Hopi language is known as Bear Ridge. The people from Acoma Pueblo know this whole region as the Wide Area of Dwellings.

I wonder what the people who lived here called their village.

9 – Parapet Wall

One of my favorite features in Balcony House is also in the North Plaza. Running along the front of this open area is a parapet wall, a protective barrier between the plaza and the steep cliff edge. As someone who is a bit afraid of heights, I can appreciate this added security element.

As you look past the parapet wall the model shows a grey abyss where the most spectacular canyon view exists. Facing north east, the residents of Balcony house enjoyed sweeping views of a 600-foot-deep sandstone canyon scattered with a forest of pinyon and juniper trees. Rising from the horizon, beyond the canyon's rim, the snow capped peaks of the La Plata mountains can be seen against a deep blue southwest sky.

On a clear day like today... I must ask myself, did the incredible view add to the resident's decision to live here?

Based on the items the Ancestral Pueblo people left behind and the skill and care with which they built their homes it is apparent they valued beauty.

10 - View of Entire Site

For our final stop, let's take a step back and view the entire site. Isn't it remarkable? It's hard to imagine the circumstances that caused the families who lived here to move away from such a beautiful home.

When cliff dwellings like Balcony House were being constructed in the 11 and 1200s, massive changes were occurring across the Pueblo world. While many residents of Mesa Verde moved from the mesa tops into cliff dwellings, others began to migrate away from the region entirely.

Archeological evidence points to prolonged droughts, diminished resources, and social upheaval as factors that may have contributed to these migrations.

By the end of the 13th century, the once bustling Mesa Verde was almost completely depopulated. By the 1280s, the sounds of construction that had filled the air moved southward toward the Pueblos of today—on the Hopi mesas of Arizona and along the Rio Grande and its tributaries in New Mexico.

Though left, these homes were never forgotten. Today their descendants continue to return to Mesa Verde to learn from and connect with their ancestors.

11 - Conclusion

I hope you've enjoyed exploring Balcony House together.

As we part, I hope that you take what you have learned and share it with your friends and family. Places like Balcony House provide us with an incredible window into the past of a continent filled with creativity, ingenuity, architectural and artistic achievements and a diversity of cultures that persist today.

To learn more about Mesa Verde, visit our website... or better yet, come visit us and step into a Cliff Dwelling and the past.

