

Canyon of the Ancients

Canyon of the Ancients, Colorado, U.S.

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August 1, 2017 by [Scott Gilbertson](#)

I spend more time than is strictly necessary staring at maps. I have since I was a kid. I used to drag my dad to a map store just to buy 7.5 topo sheets of the High Sierras and desert around southern California.

I like maps, especially blank spots on maps and in the United States there are very few places with as many blank spots as the Four Corners region of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. One of the relative blank spots I kept staring at was something called Canyon of the Ancients. After our disappoint experience with Mesa Verde we were anxious to get back to some ruins that were less crowded and I felt like Canyon of the Ancients was a good place to start. Looking up reviews on the web got me tons of negative reviews from people complaining about the lack of signage, getting lost and never seeing anything but private farmland. Perfect.

We started at a museum up in Dolores CO, which exists mostly because in the mid 1980s this area decided it need a reservoir. The problem with filling in a canyon around here is that you're filling in 2000 years of archaeological treasures. They found so much pottery here that (according to some locals we talked to) the museum put most of it in burlap sacks and smashed them to fit in drawers. Keep that in mind next time you think archaeologists are the best preservers of the past. Personally I'd rather have those pots on someone's mantel than smashed in a drawer. The rest of us will never see it either way, might as well let at least one person enjoy it.

I didn't actually know this tidbit when we were at the museum so I was able to enjoy it. It had a good bit of interactive stuff. The kids got to grind some corn, which made me incredibly happy we don't have to do that these days. Though of course, at the rate we're going I would not at all be surprised if we're back to grinding corn before my grandchildren grow old.



The main purpose of stopping at the museum though was to get some better maps of the area, which we did. We decided to go to the best preserved ruin first, which was nice enough, but metal reinforcements and the rest of the modern structural work necessary to stabilize an excavated ruin are, to my mind, distracting (but necessary, I get it).



After that the kids were tired of driving around so we headed back to Mancos.



1950s Chevrolet Apache wagon. You don't see these much. We're on the hunt for something better than a minivan, I'd love for it to be one of these but I don't really have a way to fab parts in the bus :)

But then Corrinne and I changed our minds and decided we'd go see one other pueblo, known as Sand Canyon.

After winding through a bizarre patchwork of private and public lands we finally found a tiny turnout with an even tinier sign. We tucked some water in our packs and hit the short trail. Unlike most ruins we'd been to, Sand Canyon was reburied after it was excavated back in the 1960s (if you want something to last out here, you don't leave it exposed to the elements, you rebury it and leave it like you found it). Instead of walking through buildings and rooms as we did in Chaco, in Sand Canyon you step over vaguely defined walls and crumbs of stones, a bit like my favorite ruin in southeast asia — Beng Melea, which is about two hours north of the rest of Angkor Wat and still mostly just a bunch of stone in the jungle. There's no jungle in Sand Canyon, but the juniper, prickly pear and rice grass — all of which the kids pointed out, unprompted, as we hiked, so perhaps Mesa Verde was not a total loss — fill the same roll.

Sand Canyon sits on the edge of a juniper strewn mesa with a short trail that winds through it and eventually down that canyon. The pueblo itself was one of the largest in the area, bigger than anything in Mesa Verde. Just about 800 years ago roughly 725 people lived on the edge of this mesa in a singular walled structure. There were 420 rooms, 90 kivas and 14 towers. A spring used to run right through the middle of it, though it didn't have any water when we were there. There were roofed plazas, kivas connected to towers and some other oddities. Although it doesn't fit with the park service narrative and

therefore wasn't on any of the signs, in 1290 41 women men and children were massacred here and if anyone survived they moved on. No one has lived here since.



See the tower that dates from 900AD?

We wandered around, trying to piece together the structure of things based on the shape of rocks piled here in there in might have been patterns. It's tough to trust your brain when it comes to patterns though, it'll see patterns where there are none. Or perhaps patters that aren't the ones you're looking for. Still, we picked out a few kivas and what a sign said was the outer wall. We found potsherds. And then we put them back in the ground.

Unlike Chaco this location made sense — there was a commanding view of the canyon and a spring running right through the middle of what became the city. Anyone passing through the area would want to stay here. And a lot of people did pass through here. Over 6,000 sites have been recorded in the area Canyon of the Ancients covers and the best guess is that there are plenty more out there waiting to be found.

Even if you don't head off into the desert in search of some new ruin — it's worth bearing in mind that not officially recorded is very different than undiscovered — there's plenty to find here. All the kids found their own potsherds, including the biggest piece we've found yet.



Eventually the heat and the stillness got to us and we headed back to the car for more water. One the way we detoured up to the high point of the mesa overlooking the canyon. We made a stab at a group picture, but mostly we just sat there awhile, listening to the silence of the desert and ruins.



Our trip to the Canyon of the Ancients happened to take place exactly four months after we left Athens. Honestly though, Athens feels a lot farther in the rearview mirror than that to me.