

THE GHOSTS OF GREATER CEDAR MESA

Words by JEREMY PUGH

Photos by SONYA DOCTORIAN







Opening spread: Hiking Cave Towers; Above: Jeep expedition to River House Ruin

"Good spot guys," I mutter to the ghosts as I dump my pack onto the grass at the side of the trail. "Now, how did you get all that up there?"

I've discovered yet another riddle of the ancients down here on Cedar Mesa, a plundered cliff dwelling that's crumbling, but still standing enough to stop me in my tracks and drop my jaw. There are sites like this down virtually every canyon. This one, I'm told later, is called Ballroom and here I am, having just blundered upon it, while I was looking for a completely different site that I've no doubt missed along the way.

At times, it's like that here. Cedar Mesa is a loosely guarded collection of not-so-secret archaeological mysteries, tucked into cliff walls rising above a labyrinth of slot canyons writhing across the Mesa. Standing below the Ballroom, I regard the few Bureau of Land Management trail indicators that point up the cliffside. I shuffle nervously, considering the ascent up the canyon wall. The well-trod trail lets me know that I'm clearly not the first guy to have come this way but in the silence of this shady slot canyon, I feel like I'm intruding.

That crumbling wall up there? It was put up there by somebody with a brain and hands and a plan and ooh-boy it raises the hair on the back of my neck.

There are ghosts out here on Cedar Mesa.

The following morning, it's BLM Archaeologist Don Simonis who reveals to me the name, "Ballroom." They call it that "for the deep, wide cave that lies in the cliff wall behind the

ruins, which gave me goose bumps during my exploration. It is just one of the thousands of archaeological sites scattered around the Cedar Mesa area in San Juan County.

"You walk up any canyon in Southeastern Utah, chances are you're going to find some archaeological site. You're going to find something," Don says.

Don works out of the BLM Field Office in Monticello, Utah, and has spent the last seven years as the office's archaeologist, documenting, searching out and fretting over the many places like Ballroom that dot the landscape. San Juan County, Utah, has a population of about 15,000 people and Blanding, Monticello and Bluff are the main outposts of modern humanity down here. The surrounding area is mostly public land called out on billboards as "Utah's Canyon Country" (not to be confused with Canyonlands National Park, located mostly in San Juan County) and sometimes also for its role occupying one of the four corners of the Four Corners Region — where the square parts of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona all convene. It is home to some of the comeliest landscapes among the highly scenic vistas of Southern Utah. And the area's main bisecting road, Route 95, is easily among the most scenic byways on Earth as it cuts across a topographical formation known as Cedar Mesa.

Seven hundred to 2,500 years ago, give or take a decade or two, Cedar Mesa was home to a thriving civilization of cliff dwelling people known as the Ancestral Puebloans and contemporaneously as Anasazi Indians. The latter name means "ancient enemy" in Navajo and, although it remains commonly used, it is not culturally accurate, Don explains.

According to Don, we know a lot about these people. We know, for instance, that these people had a propensity for building homes, ceremonial buildings and storage structures high up on cliff walls and that they thrived between A.D. 800 and 1200 in a relatively organized society, influenced by the same group that lived in Mesa Verde over in Colorado and administered by a theorized headquarters based in Chaco Canyon. Areas emblematic of those halcyon days can be discovered off of Utah Highway 95, with many spots on the well-traveled trails up Mule Canyon. Among the best: House on Fire and Cave Towers. Most of this area is on public lands. The BLM is busy trying to keep track of all the ancient sites scattered across the region and fill in the blanks on what we don't know. Which talking to Don, is a lot.

"Archaeology is a lot of guesswork," Don says. "And it doesn't help that



Above: River House Ruin

IF YOU GO...

San Juan County, in the southeast corner of the state, is five to six hours' drive from Salt Lake City. Monticello makes a good base of operations and the surrounding area is mostly public lands offering ample opportunities for primitive camping. Hiking and backpacking in the Cedar Mesa area can be challenging. For many hikes, consider obtaining quality printed maps of the area and study before you go.

Learn more at visitutah.com/dwellings

WHEN TO GO

Spring and Fall are the most advantageous times to travel.

BEGINNER'S SITE LIST

Not all of San Juan County is rugged and remote. The best and most accessible BLM sites typically feature family-friendly trails starting from paved or well-maintained dirt roads.

- Salvation Knoll Historic Site
- Mule Canyon Ruins
- Butler Wash Site
- Three-Kiva Ruin
- Edge of the Cedars State Park Museum in Blanding

RESOURCES

The BLM has a field office in Monticello on U.S. 191 for directions and backcountry permits (435) 587-1510. The Kane Gulch Ranger Station on S.R. 261 is open from 8 a.m. to noon daily from March 1 through June 15 and September 1 through October 31.

RESPECT AND PROTECT

Always visit with care. Become stewards of our nation's priceless cultural and natural heritage by discovering and promoting responsible outdoor ethics in the "Respect and Protect" campaign from the BLM Utah State Office and TreadLightly.org.

PRO TIPS

Carry cash in small bills for fee areas.

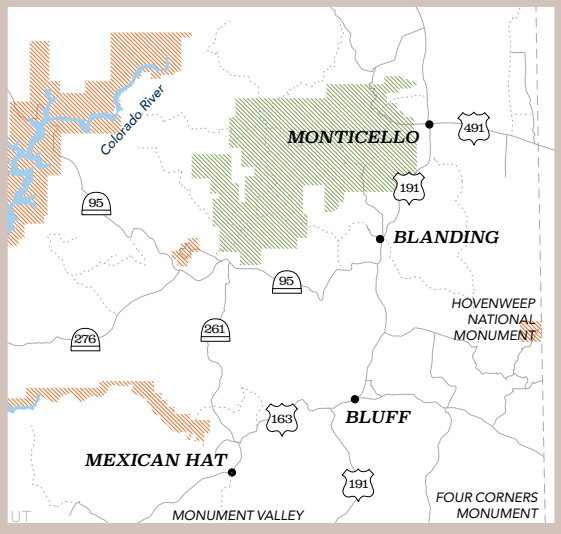
Religiously wear sunscreen, wear a large brimmed hat and light long sleeves are better than a tank top. Pack plenty of water and drink it often.

Traveling in a high-clearance, 4WD vehicle off the main highway is a good idea.

people are removing artifacts and taking away valuable information."

Yes that's right. Don's biggest headache is modern people — folks who might pocket an arrowhead or a pot shard and think it's no big deal and professional thieves who are actively searching out sites for profit. To put it in CSI terms, an ancient dwelling is like a crime scene. Everything from what is found to where it is found offers priceless clues. Investigators like Don can learn a lot from an undisturbed scene.

"These sites contain invaluable knowledge and are sacred to Native American tribes," Don says. "We ask people to respect that and help us protect them. If they find something, leave it there and call us."



In my college days, well before the time where we all walked around with small computers in our pockets, my brother and I would take trips into the Wind River and Uinta mountains. We spent many an evening at the kitchen table, planning and poring over topographical maps. I was reminded of those analog times as I delved into the mysteries of San Juan County and the Greater Cedar Mesa.

I found myself often going on (and second-guessing) the advice of other hikers who offered up directions that always end with, "You'll miss it if you aren't careful," and then gamely heading up a trail into a canyon. Archaeologist Don, for example, sent me into Fish Canyon on a long, hot slog across open desert where I was rewarded with a glimpse into several large Ancestral Puebloan ruins and blessed shade along a creek before my trek back out under the desert sun. But even this venture, blessed by an experienced guide like Don, was tickled with uncertainty, which it turns out is lovely feeling that offers a weightlessness in reducing what we need to know down to the four points of the compass.

Amid this informational and literal desert lies the Kane Gulch Ranger Station, an oasis of advice, guidance and permits. Only open for the morning hours and closed during the height of summer heat and depths of winter, it is important to include a stop here in your plans. The station offers a healthy selection of quality maps, interpretive displays and videos as well as solid advice from staff members who will give directions to well-known sites in areas like Mule Canyon that visitors can easily access. The station sits at one of the main entries to the Grand Gulch Primitive Area and is also a jumping-off point for backcountry explorers. Today, I'm here early enough to see one of the rangers come out and run the flag up the pole before she toggles the closed sign to open and I'm first in line to pore over maps with her. She gives me a short list of sites and some typically analog directions as well as sound advice about sunscreen, sleeves and hats.

I take that advice into mind and set off down the highway looking for the dirt road that will lead me to the other dirt road that will lead me to the next trailhead. But then again, what passes for a road through the desert is often full of steep ruts that require good clearance and four-wheel drives, and are never, ever to be attempted during or shortly after a rainstorm. Stuck unprepared in the middle of Cedar Mesa is not a good place to be.

I pick my way down one of these "roads" to a trailhead. Once there, I encounter a stern little hike down one canyon wall and up another, marked by cairns and other bootprints. I nevertheless have the place to myself as I scramble from rock pile to rock pile. I once again chuckle and mutter "good spot, guys" looking around at the plentiful shade and water that marked this as a place to call home about 1,000 years ago. I feel myself mentally populating the ruins and having fun with conjecture based on my talk with Don yesterday and my own imagination. I picture a bustling little neighborhood, Richard Scarry-style — a mailman, a baker, the mayor and Lowly the Worm rushing to and fro and chuckle a bit before darker, more sinister thoughts come. Where did they go? What would drive them from this shady place? The silence in these canyons is total — a rustling breeze, occasional chirping bird and trickling remnants of a recent rain are all that intrude. I gather my thoughts and stare hard at this place and drill down into the silence.

I feel the hands that put it there with a plan, and I shiver.

Yes. There are ghosts out there on Cedar Mesa and the thrill of meeting them is unlike any experience you'll ever have. Go there with an open mind, a kind heart and they will speak to you, too. But tread lightly and be reverent; they are watching.



Above: Butler Wash Ruin

DON SIMONIS: AN ARCHAEOLOGIST'S VIEW OF GREATER CEDAR MESA

Don Simonis is one of two archaeologists at the Monticello Bureau of Land Management Office. His research indicates that there are well over 100,000 significant archeological sites in Southeastern Utah. In San Juan County alone, archaeologists have cataloged 32,000 sites. A large number of these sites are located on Cedar Mesa and along the San Juan River, and they once belonged to a people called the Ancestral Puebloans, who inhabited the area from around A.D. 800 to A.D. 1200. However, evidence also exists of people living there as far back as 11,000 years ago, to a group known as the Clovis culture, when humans and large woolly mammoth occupied the historical timeline together.

"It's kind of like Egypt," Don says, explaining why the region is so rich in culturally significant places. "Although we haven't uncovered any pharaoh's tombs, we have had amazing discoveries of what we call 'perishables'. That is, anything organic, like clothing or blankets, plant material. In any other climate they wouldn't have lasted, but here in this dry climate, kept out of moisture, we find objects that give us great insight into how these people lived."

According to Don, Ancestral Puebloans built elaborate cliff dwellings for defense from each other and the elements, as well as religious and ceremonial reasons. Also, many of the sites were granaries where corn, their primary crop, was stored for times of drought. A long drought occurred around A.D. 1200, which is thought to be a contributing factor for the eventual movement and dispersal of people out of the area.

"They didn't just disappear," Don says. "They migrated out of the area over a long period of time, 100 years or more, into New Mexico and Arizona. They intermarried with Utes and Navajos. It's very complex what happened and we are still making discoveries."

Because the sites are so rich with materials, Don and his colleagues fight a constant battle to protect invaluable resources that are under threat.

"We want people to visit here with a very light touch," he says. "Our mission is to stop the vandalism and looting that has been going on in this area for more than 100 years. People have to realize that these sites are incredibly important and if you take even one piece away it's like taking a page from a book. It's lost forever."

Learn how to help Respect and Protect Utah's cultural resources at treadlightly.org.