



Tour de Cliff Dwellings

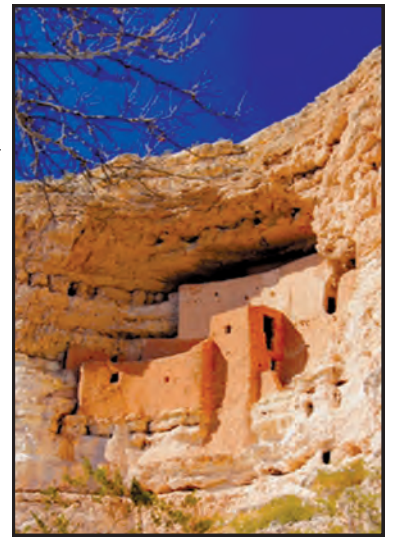
Wheeling through the West by: Carin Aichele



40 rooms sheltering 60 people at 180 feet above the ground, you might call this “high adventure”. Welcome to Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, New Mexico.

Standing below or within a cliff dwelling, it is with reverence that I experience the numinousness that enshrouded ancient cave dwellers. As my recent travels have taken me largely throughout the southwest USA, specifically Arizona and New Mexico, the opportunity for engagement with a cliff dwelling is ubiquitous.

to have commissioned the structures and hence the naming of the dwellings by European Americans in the mid 1800’s. The castle is notable for its sheer elevation and difficult access – by ladders. This would have made construction a lofty endeavor but provided a high level of natural defense from enemy tribes. Other nearby historical sites to visit include Montezuma’s Well and Tuzigot National Monument. (<http://www.nps.gov/moca/historyculture/index.htm>)



The most recent was the aforementioned Gila Cliff Dwellings. These cave dwellings and the surrounding land are purported to have been occupied for thousands of years. It is a mystery as to why between 1270 - 1300 the Mogollon tribe constructed the complex rock, mortar and timber structures within the caves. The Mogollon were hunter/gatherers as well as farmers. Farming consisted of corn, beans and squash which are known as the “three sisters”. The Gila River valley was a formidable location for successful crops. The Mogollon occupation of the cliff dwellings was brief, it is speculated that limited natural resources and drought may have compelled their departure. A hundred years later, the region was occupied by the Apaches including famed Apache leader Geronimo. We have ecologist Aldo Leopold to thank for urging the US government to protect this spectacular river and wilderness area in 1924. The Gila River watershed is the longest undammed stretch of river in the contiguous USA. Leopold was also instrumental in the creation of the 1964 Wilderness Act that provides us with relatively unfettered access to some of the world’s most extraordinary landscapes. (<http://www.nps.gov/gicl/photosmultimedia/photogallery.htm>)



In a relatively small area of Arizona, you may experience several cliff or other ancient dwellings. The “biggies” are Montezuma’s Castle near Sedona, Walnut Canyon near Flagstaff, and Casa Grande between Tucson and Phoenix.

Montezuma’s Castle is an easy day trip from anywhere in central AZ. The Castle is a 20-room, 5-story, 3,500 square foot structure nestled in the limestone walls. The Sinagua culture inhabited the dwellings from approximately 1125-1400, and are thought to have lived in the Verde Valley region for at least 8 centuries commencing in the 700’s. The Aztec emperor Montezuma was mistakenly believed



Walnut Canyon is my site of choice. (<http://www.nps.gov/waca/index.htm>) Feint at heart when it comes to heights and narrow passages along sheer cliffs? I urge you to slake your fear and make the descent as this place is awe-inspiring! The Island Trail hike into the cliff dwellings is strenuous descending 185 feet down a mildly tenuous staircase with exposed sides into the canyon below. While the adventurer in me appreciated this, it was the magnitude, the majesty and the community nature of Walnut Canyon that took my breath away and left me hoping that I had been part of this collective in a past life. Walnut

Canyon is home to vast cave and cliff dwellings with the national monument site being the largest and only accessible to the public. The site is still considered sacred to the Hopi – I’m not in disagreement, I had a strong desire to don a backpack, trek down and wander along Walnut Creek in search of my spiritual ancestors. On a brief walk along the rim trail, as we perused the informative interpretive signs, we enjoyed a most rousing discovery of large cat-like paw prints in the post rain mud. Not far were large mule deer tracks and scat. The suspicion that a mountain lion had recently been close was confirmed by a ranger who said that there was one seen several times recently. I am humbled and grateful that places such as this exist where both animal and human may return to their ancestral “home” and find rejuvenation for the soul.

BIO.

Carin Aichele has embarked on her new life living in her RV towing a jeep with 3 bikes, a kayak, snow shoes, a tennis racquet, and a golden retriever with intention to travel the USA and Canada. She will continue writing articles for Living in the West as she journeys inside & outside of CA. She is underway with her first book incorporating spiritual healing testimonies combined with creative photography. She will also be writing a book about her travels. With a spinner for direction and one for distance, Carin will be regularly traveling to the destination as directed by the spinners, writing about the experiences of going into the unknown with curiosity and childlike wonder. Carin’s website is live for your perusal at: www.sublimetravel.net. Her blog is on the “follow me!” tab. Carin may be reached at cga.sublimetravel@gmail.com