Named for the people who now occupy the region, Navajo National Monument protects Betatakin, Keet Seel, and Inscription House—remarkably well-preserved dwellings built hundreds of years ago by Ancstral Puebloans. In the cliffs faces and terraces of the Tsegi Canyon system, modern Navajo life carries on side by side with the distant past.

Nomadic hunter-gatherers came and went from this area for thousands of years. Around 2,000 years ago people began increasingly adapt farming, and a distinct culture emerged in the Four Corners region—the Ancestral Puebloans (sometimes called Anasazi). By 1200 the land surrounding today’s national monument was dotted with the farms of the Ancstral Puebloan people. Their villages, clusters of masonry rooms, stood nearby. Wide-ranging trade brought items like cotton, turquoise, sea shells, and parrot feathers. Rainfall was as scarce then as now, but usually there was enough to sustain their drought-adapted crops. Even so, harder times repeatedly prompted the people to move their farms and villages. While many probably remained in the bottomlands, others took shelter in the cliffs. The three cliff dwellings at Navajo National Monument date from around 1250 to 1300. There were countless other structures on the canyon rim and floor, but these three survive protected by sandstone alcoves.

The cliff dwellers flourished here for five decades, then began to move away. There are many theories: drought, erosion, social pressures, religious dictates, or other influences that we know nothing about. Some say that the Ancstral Puebloans joined other peoples in the Southwest in regional migrations, underwent cultural shifts, and became the contemporary Hopi, Zuni, other Pueblo groups, and other tribes.

Walking on a rainbow trail, you are on Navajo Nation land, which covers an area about the size of West Virginia. The traditional boundaries of the Navajo homeland are four sacred mountains: Blanca Peak in southern Colorado; Mount Humphreys in southwestern Colorado; Mount Taylor near Grants, New Mexico; and the San Francisco Peaks north of Flagstaff, Arizona. This has been home to the Navajo, or Dine, for centuries. As you travel through Navajo country, listen for people talking in their native language.

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The Navajo first learned silversmithing from the Spanish, and have since developed distinctive jewelry styles. With the arrival of the railroads—and boom—in the late 1800s, the Navajo made and sold a wide variety of crafts. Most prized are their sheep’s wool rugs hand-woven on vertical looms.

Navajo National Monument was established to incorporate the ancient dwellings of the Southwest were rediscovered in the late 1800s, they suffered looting and damage. The Antiquities Act of 1906, signed into law by President Theodore Roosevelt, allows U.S. Presidents to proclaim national monuments protecting national and cultural treasures. In 1969 Navajo National Monument was established to incorporate Keet Seel, and later Betatakin and Inscription House.

Modern Navajo people are not Puebloans, but some traditional Navajo trace their ancestry back to the prehistoric cliff dwellers through clan ceremonies and oral histories. When Spanish explorers and missionaries brought horses, sheep, and goats, the Puebloans and later the Navajo became part herders. Sheep and cattle ranching are crucial to today’s way of life, and you can see livestock grazing on canyon terraces as they have for hundreds of years.

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Walk on a rainbow trail; walk on a trail of song, and all about you will be beauty. There is a way out of every dark over a rainbow trail.

—Edward A. Navajo

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