Your Canyon Experience, Above and Below

Water carved these canyons over millions of years, exposing rock layers that are remnants of ancient habitats. Prominent on the rim and the upper canyon faces is the reddish Navajo sandstone, formed from plant sand dunes. The dunes were deposited, shaped, and reshaped by wind during a near-waterless climate 180 million years ago. Seeping water dissolves the calcite carbonate that binds the sand particles. The weakened rock breaks away in horizontal slabs, forming alcoves where the dwellings stand.

Below the Navajo sandstone is the buff-to-purplish colored Kayenta formation—sandstone, shale, and limestone. The Kayenta was deposited by freshwater streams 190 million years ago. You can see outcroppings of the Kayenta and the 210 million-year-old Wingate sandstone layer below the Betatakin alcove and along the trail to Keet Seel. The Wingate has dinosaur tracks in places. Just as the rock composition changes the deeper into the canyons you go, so does the plant life. Piney juniper forest, and adapted to sparse rainfall, dominates the rim. Climate inside the canyon is generally warmer and wetter; good for the agriculture of ancient times and grazing lands for livestock today. Look for Gambel’s oak, boxelder, and aspen. On north-facing slopes you might spot Douglas fir.

As you walk around, what may look to you like plain old dirt is actually alive. The ground is covered with biological soil crust, a community of cyanobacteria (blue-green algae), green algae, lichens, mosses, microfungi, bacteria, and byproducts of all these organisms. The crust helps prevent soil erosion and retain water. Even a single footprint can damage it, and it takes dozens of years to self-repair. Don’t bust the crust—stay on trails!

Mexican spotted owl

Villages in Sandstone

Betatakin/Talastima
Ancient Puebloans lived here from about 1250 to 1300. Their agricultural fields were on the canyon’s rims and floors. For living space, the people chose this area because it was deep enough for shelter and, because it faced south, was warmed by the winter sun and cool in summer. Because the rock layer below the Navajo sandstone was less porous, water seeped out here, another benefit.

At its height, 75 to 100 people lived here in clan or family groups. They didn’t spend much time indoors; most activities took place in open courtyards or agricultural fields. Archeologists have documented 135 rooms, some now destroyed by rockfall. Rooms were used for food storage, living, and ceremonies. The people used sandstone, soil, wood, bark, reeds, and grasses either alone or in combination. Smoke residue indicates fires for cooking, warming, or ceremonies.

Betatakin/Talastima
Inscription House remains closed to the public

Inscription House/Tsu’ovi
This village is in a high, shallow sandstone alcove. Like Betatakin and Keet Seel, it was permanently occupied from about 1350 to 1300. About half the rooms were constructed of adobe bricks rather than the stone blocks of the other sites. It was named for wall markings—originally thought to be from Spanish explorers in the 1600s, but now attributed to Mormon settlers from the mid-1800s. Modern Indian tribes hold ceremonies here. Incription House remains closed to the public due to its unstable and fragile condition. There are no parking areas or routes to this dwelling. There are private residences nearby; please respect owners’ privacy.

Keet Seel/Kawestima
This village is in a high, shallow sandstone alcove. Like Betatakin and Keet Seel, it was permanently occupied from about 1250 to 1300. At its height, 75 to 100 people lived here in clan or family groups. They didn’t spend much time indoors; most activities took place in open courtyards or agricultural fields. Archeologists have documented 135 rooms, some now destroyed by rockfall. Rooms were used for food storage, living, and ceremonies. The people used sandstone, soil, wood, bark, reeds, and grasses either alone or in combination. Smoke residue indicates fires for cooking, warming, or ceremonies.

Navajo National Monument
Navajo National Monument is off US 160, about five miles northwest of Kayenta. From US 160, take AZ 564 nine miles. The visitor center has information, exhibits, videos, and sales items. The Navajo Arts and Crafts Enterprise has a gift shop specializing in Navajo silverwork. Service animals are welcome in the visitor center. The daily operating hours are from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. year-round. This is a natural area with canyons, cliffs, fall hazards. Be alert and safety conscious at all times. Be prepared for changing weather. Do not drink groundwater. Hiking can be strenuous, especially on weekends and in summer. Call the park staff for information and reservations.

Navajo Nation National Monument
At its height, 75 to 100 people lived here in clan or family groups. They didn’t spend much time indoors; most activities took place in open courtyards or agricultural fields. Archeologists have documented 135 rooms, some now destroyed by rockfall. Rooms were used for food storage, living, and ceremonies. The people used sandstone, soil, wood, bark, reeds, and grasses either alone or in combination. Smoke residue indicates fires for cooking, warming, or ceremonies.

Keet Seel/Kawestima
Keet Seel is the largest village at Navajo National Monument and one of the best preserved in the Southwest. It was occupied much longer than Betatakin. The dwellings, a paved trail from the visitor center leads to an overlook with a spectacular cross-canyon view of the ancient village of Betatakin framed in its sandstone arch. 1.3 miles round-trip, self-guiding.

Aspen Trail
This trail branches off the Sandal Trail and descends 300 feet to a raing forest of aspen, habitat for the endangered Mexican spotted owl. This is a steep trail via slabs and dirt surface. 0.8 mile round-trip, self-guiding.

Keet Seel dwelling standing in archeological area

Canyon View Trail
This trail leads to a view from the head of Betatakin Canyon and continues to the historic rim range station. 0.6 mile round-trip, self-guiding.

Betatakin/Talastima
You must visit this site on a ranger-guided tour. This fairly strenuous five-mile round-trip hike takes three to five hours. The elevation on the rim is 7,300 feet, and there is a 700-foot gradual descent. Advance reservations are highly recommended, especially on weekends and in summer. Call the park staff for information and reservations.

Keet Seel/Kawestima
This strenuous, 17-mile round-trip hike takes you to one of the best-preserved cliff dwellings in the Southwest. The trail drops 1,000 feet to the canyon floor, then follows shallow streams to the dwelling. At times you will be hiking through water, so plan accordingly. Once at Keet Seel, you must wait for the ranger on duty to lead a tour of the dwellings.

Hikers must get a permit and orientation information at the visitor center. The daily limit is 20 people, so advance reservations are highly recommended; call the park staff for information. You don’t want to rush through this experience; most hikers choose to stay overnight at the primitive Keet Seel campground. The campground and portions of the trail are outside the park boundary on Navajo Nation land, often indicated by sheep camp, corral, and fences. Please respect the privacy of canyon residents.

Mexican spotted owl

For Your Safety
This is a natural area with canyons, cliffs, falling rocks, flash-floods, lightning, and other hazards. Be alert and cautious at all times. Rocks can fall at any time in the alcoves and canyons. Violators on tours enter the alcoves at their own risk. For further information, check the park website or ask at the visitor center.

Protect Natural and Cultural Resources
All natural and cultural objects are protected by federal law, with substantial fines for violation. Protect Natural and Cultural Resources

Navajo National Monument
Navajo National Monument is one of over 390 areas in the National Park System. For more information about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

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