

# Casa Grande Ruins

Casa Grande Ruins National Monument  
Arizona

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



After a long battle with the desert, this ancient building still commands respect. Four stories high and 60 feet long, with a platform mound filling the first floor, it is the largest known structure of the Ancestral People of the Sonoran Desert. The early Spanish explorers named it well—Casa Grande (“Great House”)—and to them it was a mystery. Its walls face the four cardinal points of the compass. A circular hole in the upper west wall aligns with the setting sun at the summer solstice. Other openings align with the sun and moon at specific times. Perhaps people would gather here to study how the positions of celestial objects related to times for planting, harvesting, and celebration.

Who were these people who watched the sky so purposefully? In 1694 Spanish missionaries were the first European Americans to ask this question. They asked nearby Indians who referred to their ancestors as Huhugham, which was translated incorrectly as Hohokam (ho ho KAHM). (Today archeologists use this term to define a cultural period.) One archeologist who studied the Ancestral People called

them the “First Masters of the American Desert.” Their origins lay with hunter-gatherers who lived in Arizona for several thousand years, but they drew also from Mesoamerican civilization. By 300 CE (Common Era) the Ancestral People lived in permanent settlements along the Salt and Gila rivers. To irrigate their fields, villages cooperated to build and manage vast canal systems that diverted water from the rivers. In areas without year-round streams, they tapped groundwater or diverted storm runoff.

The Ancestral People cooperated in trade too. Villages set along natural routes between today’s California, the Great Plains, Colorado Plateau, and northern Mexico. They traded mostly pottery and jewelry for a variety of items. Gulf of California shells were common. Macaws, mirrors, and copper bells show links to tropical Mexico, as do oval pits found in major villages. These pits may have been ballcourts for games like the Aztecs played or for gatherings. Similar ballcourts as far north as Wupatki, a prehistoric site near Flagstaff, Arizona, show the extent of the Ancestral People’s cultural influence.

Builders found building material underfoot: caliche (cuh-LEE-chee), a concrete-like mix of sand, clay, and calcium carbonate (limestone). It took 3,000 tons to build the Great House. Caliche mud was layered to form walls four feet thick at the base, tapering toward the top. Hundreds of juniper, pine, and fir trees were carried or floated

60 miles down the Gila River to the village. Anchored in the walls, the timbers formed ceiling or floor supports.

This illustration shows how a roof was made: Saguaro ribs were laid across the beams, covered with reeds, and topped with a final caliche mud layer.

Despite centuries of weathering and neglect, today the Great House stands as the most prominent example of the Ancestral People’s society.

A steel-and-concrete canopy built in 1932 continues to protect the Great House.  
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Ballcourts became less common in the 1100s, marking a gradual change in the Hohokam culture. Around 1150 CE, their culture’s Classic Period began. The Ancestral People left outlying settlements to concentrate in large villages like Casa Grande. Open villages with central plazas gave way to walled compounds. The mysterious Great House was completed about 1350. This and other Great Houses sited in villages along large canals likely played a major role in the irrigation communities.

The Classic Period lasted until the 1400s, when Hohokam culture ebbed throughout the region. By the time missionaries arrived in 1694, they found only an empty shell of the once-flourishing village of the Casa Grande. Two centuries of visitors and souvenir-hunters further damaged the site. In the late 1800s scientists pressed for its legal protection, and in 1892 the Casa Grande became the nation’s first archeological reserve. To this day the Great House keeps within its walls the secrets of the Ancestral People of the Sonoran Desert.

ILLUSTRATION: NPS / REBECCA J. LEE

## Planning Your Visit

Casa Grande Ruins National Monument preserves remains of an ancient Hohokam-era farming village as well as the enigmatic Great House.

The park is an hour southeast of Phoenix, in Coolidge, AZ. From I-10 take Coolidge exits and follow the signs to the park entrance off AZ 87/287.



A desert tortoise inspects prickly pear cactus fruits. This round-tailed ground squirrel (right) keeps watch.



A gilded flicker perches atop saguaro cactus. This necklace (right) was made from shell beads.

**Climate** Summer temperatures exceed 100°F, with thunderstorms in July and August. Winters are milder—60° to 80°—with longer periods of rain that can create brilliant desert wildflower tapestries in early spring.

**Activities** The park is open daily except for Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday in

November) and December 25. Contact the park (phone or website) for hours of operation. Admission fee. Visitor center has exhibits of Hohokam-era artifacts. Outside, trails lead through remains of what was once the largest compound in the village. Signs enable you to tour the

park on your own. More areas are visible from the observation deck in the picnic area.

**Facilities** Park has restrooms, drinking fountains, and picnic tables. Food service, stores, public phones, and fuel in Coolidge.

**For your safety and the park’s protection** Take precautions against summer heat and sudden rain or dust storms. • Pets must be leashed at all times in the park. Do not leave your animals unattended or inside your vehicle. • Service animals welcome. • Do not feed

wild animals or pick any wild plants. • Watch for poisonous reptiles. • For firearms regulations see the park website [www.nps.gov/cagr](http://www.nps.gov/cagr). • All ruins, artifacts, and natural features are protected by law and must be left undisturbed.

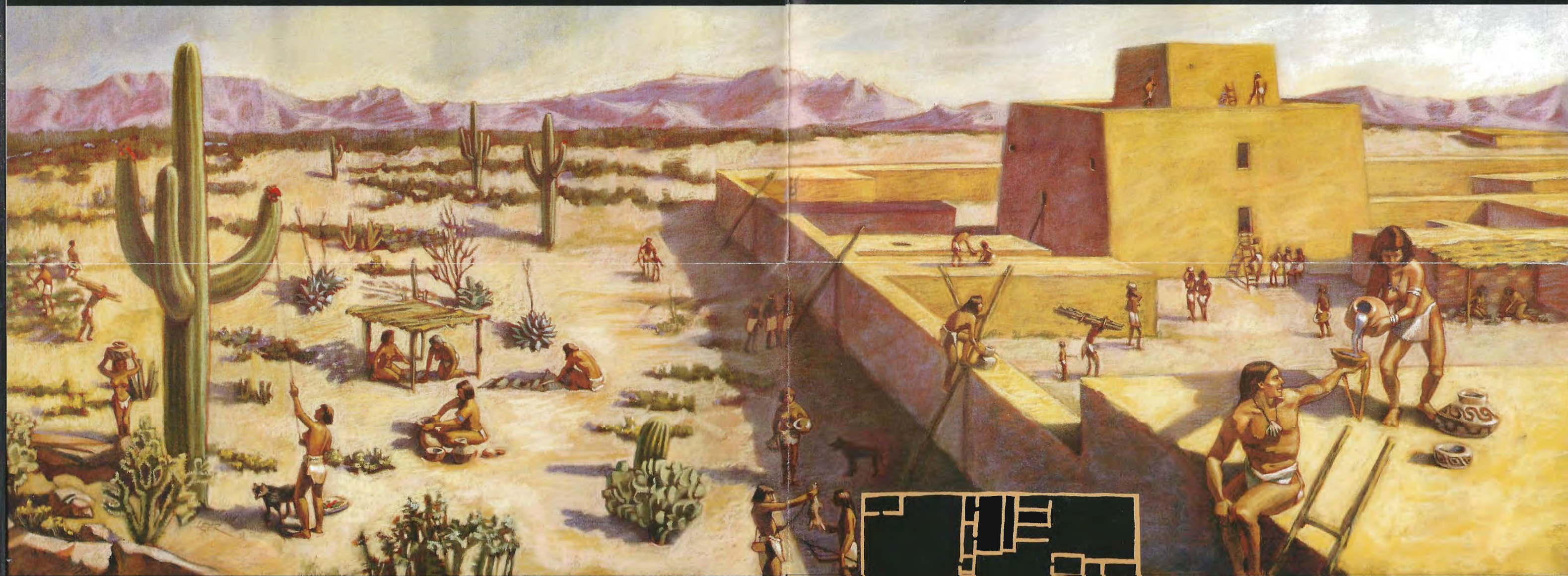
**More Information** Casa Grande Ruins National Monument 1100 Ruins Drive Coolidge, AZ 85128 520-723-3172 [www.nps.gov/cagr](http://www.nps.gov/cagr)

Casa Grande Ruins National Monument is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. Learn more about national parks at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

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The village comes to life before sunset. The first day of summer is a time of constant activity despite intense heat. Men depart the compound carrying traps, bows, and arrows. This is the best hunting time, before animals seek shelter from the sun. Large animals are elusive; to hunt mule deer, pronghorn (antelope), or bighorn sheep means a long hike into the hills. Today promises to be too hot for such a trek. Besides, rabbits and pack rats are plentiful in the area and provide a tasty meal.

Saguaro fruits are ready for harvest. From a distance, the tall cacti appear to be in bloom. This is actually the ripe fruit splitting open to reveal bright red pulp. The people work quickly to collect the fruit before it is eaten by desert creatures who prize it equally. Gatherers maneuver long poles to knock the fruit from the tips of the cactus arms. It is hard to resist eating some of the fruit right away, but they remember other villagers have waited all year for the harvest. Pulp is eaten fresh or sun-dried. Juice is cooked down to syrup or set aside to ferment. Besides ceremonial wine, the fermented juice is used to make jewelry. Artisans paint designs on shells with resin. The shells are submerged in the acidic saguaro juice, which eats away the unpro-

tected parts of the shell. When the resin is removed, the design remains raised above the surface.

Villagers take pride in their jewelry, ornaments, mosaics, woven cotton textiles, and pottery, which are popular not only with their neighbors but also with people known only through trade. As they work beneath the ramadas (open-side shelters) the artisans exchange stories of these faraway peoples and pass around tangible evidence of their existence. A black-and-white ceramic bowl from the north is serviceable, they note, but not as pleasing to the eye as their own designs. Far more enticing are the items from down south: copper bells and vivid red, blue, and green feathers from exotic birds.

A messenger arrives with news of an emergency at the canal. Men drop their work and head out to help. They wind through waist-high cornstalks to where the main canal branches off into fields. One of the gates that regulates flow has been damaged and must be repaired before crops are flooded. A party returns with reeds from along the canal, which are quickly woven into a strong mat. The mat is attached to the gate, and the gate is put

back in place. There is a collective sense of relief. This time they were able to make the repair themselves. At other times, particularly after heavy flooding, they must summon neighbors to work with them for days to clear gates, dredge channels, and reline canal beds with clay to prevent seepage.

The natural world is the source of things that sustain life and deserve respect and gratitude: Water from the Gila River, food from the desert floor and hillsides, building material from Earth itself. The people observe Earth and heavens carefully to know when to take the gifts nature offers and when to give thanks. That is why the people gather this evening in the Great House. Through a small, round hole facing west, people inside can briefly see the setting sun directly ahead on the horizon. This means today is the longest day of the year, a comforting sign that the cycle of seasons continues.

ILLUSTRATIONS NPS / REBECCA J. LEER; DIAGRAM & MAP NPS / FAULKNER

The diagram shows the known portions of the walled compound with the Great House highlighted in bright yellow. (The south-

eastern section of the compound has not been excavated.) The painting above is a conjectural village scene in the 1300s.



## A Bountiful Harvest from the Desert

Hot and dry, with few all-year water sources and little rainfall, the Sonoran Desert does not seem like a place to find the essentials for human survival. Yet for over 1,000 years the Ancestral People of the Sonoran Desert supported themselves with food they grew, hunted, or gathered here.

The Salt and Gila rivers were their life-

Because much of the cropland lay above the Gila River floodplain, canals had to start far enough upstream (east) to establish

a downhill flow. Distribution canals branched off at major settlements and then into a web of smaller channels connected

by lateral ditches that opened directly into fields. People in the villages worked together to build and maintain the system.



lines. The Ancestral People tapped these rivers with irrigation canals that diverted high water to the floodplains' rich soil.

They grew crops that withstood desert conditions. Corn, a staple, matured fast enough to minimize exposure to the elements and produce two crops per year. They planted beans, squash, tobacco, cotton, and agave, too.

Several wild plants, like amaranth, were encouraged in fields.

The Ancestral People gathered food, medicine, and materials from the wild, too. They collected wood, fruit, buds, and seeds from palo verde, mesquite, and ironwood trees; medicine from ocotillo, creosote, bursage, and saltbush. They ate saguaro, cholla, hedgehog, and prickly pear.

And they hunted small animals like rabbits and the larger mule deer and bighorn sheep.

Rivers supplied fish, waterfowl, and turtles that they ensnared or hooked. Lush riverside cottonwood and willow provided materials for baskets and ropes while reeds were used for straws, spin-

The illustration at right shows some important domesticated and wild foods:

1 & 2. Mesquite pods, a staple food, eaten whole or dried and pounded into meal.  
3. Many varieties of beans cooked when fresh or dried for storage.  
4. Squash eaten fresh or boiled; gourd shells made into containers and rattles.  
5. Prickly pear fruit

eaten fresh or dried; pads eaten fresh.  
6. Corn eaten raw or roasted, or dried and ground into flour.  
7. Fish and other animals eaten raw, cooked, or dried.  
8. Saguaro fruits eaten fresh, dried, or made into ceremonial wine.

Red-on-buff bowls represent the most distinctive style of Hohokam pottery.

