

## Montezuma Castle National Monument: Camp Verde, Arizona

by Terri Sellers, PassPorter Message Board Guide (Moderator)

Montezuma Castle National Monument is located in Camp Verde, Arizona, about 90 minutes north of Phoenix and 45 minutes south of Flagstaff on I-17, at exit 289. The Monument was dedicated in 1906 by President Theodore Roosevelt to protect one of the best-preserved cave dwelling sites in the entire United States and is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The National Monument consists of two separate sites located within five miles of each other, the Castle, and Montezuma Well. The castle site is five stories in height and was a multi-story "apartment complex." The other site's name is actually a mistake. The first non-Indians who saw the ruins assumed they were built by Aztecs, and named it after the Aztec king, Montezuma. We now know that it was not built by Aztecs, but by the Sinagua (sin-a-gwa) Indians that lived there more than 900 years ago. The site was abandoned about 600 years ago for unknown reasons.

When you enter the park, first stop and visit the Visitor's Center. There is an interpretive center here with detailed information on the monument and its history, as well as the Sinagua, their lives in at the site, and the plants and animals that you might see while you visit. Park rangers are here to answer any questions and there is a small bookstore with books, DVDs, stuffed animals and other souvenirs. All entrance fees and profits from the bookstore go back to maintaining the sites. Ranger talks are also offered on a variety of subjects throughout the day. These vary by season, check with the Visitor's Center for more details. One fun thing that we do is to collect passport stamp cancellations from each National Park and Monument we visit. At nearly all of the 394 American National Parks and Monuments (and many of the National Park Service's affiliated areas), one or more National Park Passport stamps can be acquired at no cost at park visitor centers and ranger stations. The stamps are similar in nature to a passport stamp stamped in a traveler's national passport. The stamps serve as a record of each park visit and are a fun way to remember our trips. You can purchase your passport book at any National Park or Monument bookstore for about \$10.00.

After you leave the Visitor's Center walk back along the paved, 1/4 mile trail from the center to the base of the cliff where the Castle ruin is. Before 1953, visitors were allowed to climb a ladder and actually

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enter the ruins, however, due to the adverse effects of so many people entering the ruins, it was decided to close them from future visitation to protect them. The path is a very easy walk and paved for ease of access by people of all mobility levels. The path passes in front of the castle, and to the base of the cliff where a smaller ruin called "Castle A" is located. Guests can get very close to the Castle A site. The path then curves toward Beaver Creek through a large grove of sycamore trees. This was an area that the Sinagua had fields and grew a variety of crops including corn and squash.

After viewing the castle site, get back in your car and head about 4-miles north on I-17 to exit 293. Follow the signs for Montezuma Well. This is a pre-historic sinkhole that is filled with water by two artesian springs that remains at 74 degrees year-round, and has been the site of Native American culture in the area for about 1,000 years. It's not hard to understand why -- in the hot Arizona summer 74 degrees would be pretty refreshing, and in the cold winters (it was in the 30s when we visited in January), it would be nice and warm. The springs pump out about 1.4 million gallons of water a day. The water has low oxygen levels, so no fish can live there, but some things have learned to live in the water, including some species that are only found at the well site. There is a large diversity of wildlife that use the well including many species of birds and some reptiles. I was happy we were visiting in January and these same reptiles were happily hibernating underground. My snake-loving husband was less happy.

When you enter the well site, first you will pass by "The Pithouse" ruin. Before the Sinagua became efficient pueblo builders, they dug down into the ground to create communal living areas called "pit houses." These had dirt floors, and walls and roofs made of plant material. The Park Service has built a structure over the ruins to protect it from the elements.

After visiting the pithouse, continue on the road to the main well site. The trails here are paved, but have many uneven stairs and the ascent to the well site is steep. Montezuma Well is a sort of Crater Lake at the top of a hill, and it's huge. From 900 to 1400 A.D. it supported a community of over 200 Sinagua people. Built into the well's rock walls are the cliff dwellings typical of Sinagua civilization. There is a perimeter trail that circles about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the top of the crater, and a steep trail of rock stairs that descend into the well's crater to the water's edge. Look up at the walls of the crater from down here and you can see more of the cliff dwellings inside the crater. There are also at least two small ruins near the water's edge that you can see, but not enter.

After climbing back out of the well, follow the "well outlet" signs to see

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an amazing engineering feat. Montezuma Well's outflow has been used for irrigation since the 8th century. Part of a prehistoric canal is preserved at the picnic ground, and portions of the original Sinagua canal are still in use today. Water flows from the well through an underwater "relief valve" and the Sinagua harnessed this relief valve by digging a half-mile-long canal to water their crops.

Visiting Montezuma Castle (and Well) National Monument is an enjoyable, educational 2-3 hour trip that is low cost for the whole family, with lots to see and do. The \$5.00 per person fee is good for up to seven days, and covers entrance to both parts of the Monument. We chose to visit in the winter when crowds are lowest, but the sites are open year round (except Christmas Day) and the change in seasons will also bring changes at each location as different plants and animals will be out and about for the nature enthusiast to see.

*About The Author: Terri is a Passporter Message Board Co-Guide for the Globetrotting; Disney Cruise trip report; central Florida and Running at Disney World forums. She and her husband Chris are planning their next Disney cruise in March 2011 aboard the Dream for their first anniversary.*

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