

Self-Guided Tour to Acoma

Acoma Pueblo, known as Sky City, is one of seven pueblos where people speak the Keresan language, a language shared with the pueblos of Zia, Santa Ana, San Felipe, Santo Domingo, Cochiti, and Laguna. Their name probably comes from the Keresan words *aa'ku*, meaning white rock, and *meh*, meaning people. Sky City is located 60 miles (96 km) west of Albuquerque on I-40 (Exit 108). Guided tours and still camera permits are available at the Sky City Visitor Center and Museum at the base of the mesa (800) 747-0181, (505) 469-1052 (<http://www.nmmagazine.com/NMGUIDE/acoma.html>). Fewer than 50 Acomans live in Sky City year round today, with the rest living in nearby villages. Throughout the year, all the Acomans gather on the mesa top to observe their cultural and social calendar. Census 2000 figures indicated a total of close to 3,000 Acoma villagers.

Acoma sits on a spectacular mesa of white sandstone, Cretaceous in age, that rises about 360 feet above the valley floor, a safeguard against other raiding tribes. The only access is through the new visitor center. As you ride up the mesa on a modern road, try to imagine the Acomans hauling logs and other materials up a trail of handholds chipped in the rocks. All the materials for building their church and their homes had to come up this trail until the road was built in 1929 by the film crew for *Redskin*, the story of a Navajo taken away to a government Indian School.

The 17th-century mission church of San Esteban Rey is 150 feet long, 40 feet wide, with walls 60 feet high and 10 feet thick. The large ceiling beams were hauled from their sacred mountain, Mt. Taylor, a composite volcano 30 miles away. The church had fallen into disrepair as the population of the Acoma people dwindled, but the Museum of New Mexico restored it in 1923. In the eclectic tradition of many of the Native Americans, some of their traditional dances are held in the church. Both the mission and pueblo are registered as National Historical Landmarks. In late 2006, the Acoma Pueblo was named as a National Trust Historic Site.

The soldiers of Coronado's army were the first to see the village in 1540. They had such difficulty scaling the mesa that they reported it impregnable. In 1598, the Acomans voluntarily submitted to Don Juan Oñate. Tensions apparently began to grow almost immediately, culminating in the Acoma killing 13 soldiers who stole grain from their storehouses. Oñate's retaliation was immediate and brutal. With 70 men with armor and guns, it still took a fierce battle lasting three days to subdue the natives and 80 deaths. Then as an example to other Pueblos, 70 Indian warriors were hurled off the mesa, 60 young women were sent to Mexico to be sold into slavery, and the other females and all surviving males between 12 and 25 were placed in local "servitude." Each older man had one foot cut off and was forced to work for the Spanish for twenty years.

With this history, it's understandable that as the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 was being resolved by re-conquest by the Spanish, Acoma Pueblo held out the longest. Parts of Willa Cather's book, *Death Comes to the Archbishop*, deal with events at the Acoma Pueblo. Almost 150 years later, with Mexico's independence, Spain was no longer directly involved in what is now the U.S. southwest. In another 25 years, the Acoma Pueblo found itself part of the U.S. In 1858, the U.S. recognized the rights to the land granted to the pueblos by the Spanish land grant of 1659. The Acoma and Indians from six other pueblos went to Washington, D.C. to meet with President Lincoln. After the conference, Lincoln gave each pueblo a silver-headed cane that was engraved:

A. Lincoln
Prst. U.S.A.
(name of the pueblo)
1863

These canes are still a symbol of office in the pueblos and are passed to succeeding governors. A Lincoln cane is an element in one of Tony Hillerman's novels.

Driving directions

Coming out of the La Fonda parking garage, turn right. At stop sign, turn right again, and at the next street, Water St., right again. Then at the very next intersection, turn left onto Old Santa Fe Trail that will morph into Old Pecos Trail. This will merge with St. Michael's Dr. Stay left and follow signs to I-25. Take I-25 to Albuquerque. In the center of Albuquerque, take I-40 toward Gallup about 50 miles. Take Exit 102 and follow road signs for about 16 miles. To return to Santa Fe, retrace your steps to I-40, the junction with I-25 north to Santa Fe, and The Old Pecos and Old Spanish Trails back to the La Fonda.

We hope that you had an enjoyable trip ☺!