

## On Location: 4 Corners Region

by Photographer Raymond Klass

There are several fantastic parks near the 4-corners region of the United States (where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah meet). This article discusses three lesser known sites linked by their attachment to Native American history – Bandelier National Monument, Chaco Culture National Historic Park, and Hovenweep National Monument. They can be visited separately, or if you have the chance - an extended trip can link the 3 together for a unique look at this historic and beautiful region.



From East to West, the first park that you'll encounter is Bandelier – it's just outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. It is characterized by cliff dwellings carved into the high canyon walls just beyond the visitor center. Easy to moderate trails weave throughout the canyon area, while some more difficult and lengthy trails explore the most remote regions of the park.

Sunrise at Bandelier is not as pronounced as it is at other parks, as the high canyon walls block the direct light for the first few hours during sunrise, and sunset. This allows for nice diffuse lighting conditions during the early and later hours, but almost no "golden light", as the sunrise and sunset can't be seen directly from the canyon. Some of the more difficult trails that explore the outskirts of the park visit the top of the canyon, so if sunrise or sunset were on your list, you might head there first, and visit the bottom of the canyon after.

If you're visiting the park and haven't experienced the city of Santa Fe – this mecca for arts and culture should certainly be on your list. Of particular interest to outdoor and nature photographers will be the Ansel Adams gallery and the Georgia O'Keeffe gallery. I also found it quite fun to walk around town with my camera, capturing the beautiful architecture and culture of this lively city.

Beyond Bandelier, Chaco Culture is a small canyon that houses impressively large ruins in varying degrees of deterioration. It is thought that this area was used as a main hub of trade and culture for various tribes. The road leading to the park is rough, and while it is passable with a sedan or normal clearance vehicle, I would strongly recommend a 4-wheel drive - high clearance vehicle if possible.

The park gate here opens at sunrise and closes at sunset. For the best light, make sure you arrive at the park gate right at sunrise – this is not one of those popular parks that gets incredibly crowded, so you shouldn't have large crowds to worry about. The middle of the day can be quite bright – as there are very few things that grow here – and except for a few rock outcroppings, there is no shade.





The weather can also be quite hot in all of these parks, so it's important to stay hydrated. Water is available at an outdoor tap outside of the visitor center. When I visited in late June, the temperatures were averaging around 110 degrees Fahrenheit. Typically I spend the morning and afternoon exploring the park, while resting during the hot noon hours.

Several trails weave throughout Chaco Canyon, and some explore the upper rim area of the canyon. All of the trails are worth taking, though I would place priority on the lower trails that more directly explore the ruins. While there are some overviews achievable via the rim trail, I generally found the better views to be located closer to the structures themselves.

Hovenweep National Monument spans between Colorado and Utah, and is the smallest of the three parks. It is also the least handicap accessible of the three, as the main attraction is a short loop trail over fairly rugged terrain that leads to wonderful views of the mesa-top structures. Unlike many other parks, Hovenweep is broken up into 5 satellite locations, which are spread out by about 16 miles.

The great thing about Hovenweep is that you'll likely be one of the only people there visiting. The photographic opportunities are excellent, as you won't have to fight with the crowds that often form in more popular parks like nearby Mesa Verde. Hovenweep is also accessible day or night by a short trail leading from the small campground – unlike like both Bandelier and Chaco which close during the overnight hours. This makes the park a great place for sunrise, sunset, or even night images.

The 4 corners region has a wealth of great photographic locations. Chaco, Bandelier, and Hovenweep are but three of the many parks that inhabit the area – if you have the time, there are plenty more to explore. Though these parks are all linked by their rich cultural history, they each offer a different experience, and differing photographic opportunities. Whether you have a day or a week, these parks offer a wonderful experience, and though they may be lesser known, they provide ample opportunity to make great photographs.

