

## Mesa Verde, Colorado. The Cliff Houses

The weather was fine at Cortez, but they said one could never tell what the weather would be like at the top of the mesa. After all, it was only the beginning of March. The ascent was by a road with many hairpins and turnbacks and precipitous cliffs at the edge. A surefooted mule might have been comforting, but was not really necessary. The opposing traffic was nil. A third of the way up-- it is about twenty miles from the main road to the cliff houses-- we passed our first sign of life, a road crew clearing away a snow slide. "Can we get through?" we asked with timorous voices, and they waved us on. Half way up we passed a reception center and a hotel snowed in to their lower windows, and the sign that said "Closed for the Season" seemed redundant. Another ten miles of apprehensive driving-- there was no indication anywhere as to what we would find at the "end"--- and we were there. We found a lodge, and a museum completely open,

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running, warm, together with a good dozen nuts (i.e., devotees) who had arrived before us.

Behind the lodge is a sharp and narrow canyon. On the opposite face, natural forces had cleft the canyon wall. In this roofed cleft, the Mesa Verde Indians, sometime between 1100 and 1300, erected and lived in their small city of cubical condominiums.

A walk of a quarter mile from the lodge, largely down and then across, puts one at the cubes. The general outlines are familiar, but what is not is the realization that this city is located in a cleft. It is a marvel of compactness and must have been easily defensible. One sees underground store rooms and hollowed rocks for corn grinding. The top of the cleft is still blackened from the smoke <sup>that once</sup> issued from the cliff houses.

On the top of the mesa the Indians cultivated beans and squash. It is thought that a generation of bad weather forced the Indians to abandon their cleft.

The most moving exhibit in the museum is, in a way, a dish of ancient beans, found perfectly preserved.