

Indian Pueblos Grew from Huts

By Patricia Arrigoni

VERDE VALLEY, Arizona – While people have been flocking to the Arizona desert for winter sunshine for the past 100 years, those taking time to visit the northern part of the state, specifically the Verde Valley, have been limited to dedicated skiers or anthropologists and archaeologists studying the numerous ancient Indian ruins and monuments found in the area.

Archaeologists believe these Indians originally came across the Bering land bridge from Siberia. They lived in small clusters of crude pit houses which later evolved into great stone cities.

They learned to irrigate vast acres of crops including pumpkins, corn, wheat and beans. Networks of roads were constructed for trade.

I visited the 800-year-old Tuzigoot (pronounced “TOO-zee-goot” – meaning “crooked water” in Apache) Indian ruins, which are two miles east of Cottonwood, or about 50 miles southwest of Flagstaff on Highway 89A.

Visitors can hike among the ruins of what once was a thriving village overlooking the Verde River. Between 1125 and 1400 A.D. the northern Indians, now called Sinagua (“seen-AH-wa” – Spanish for “without water”), built a cluster of rooms on a limestone ridge 120 feet above the Verde Valley. These 15 or 20 rooms grew into a pueblo two stories high with 92 rooms covering the entire summit of the ridge, an area around 500 feet by 100 feet. The Indians entered their home by means of ladders to the roof.

Tuzigoot was abandoned in the 1400s. The reason remains a mystery. In 1933 and 1934, the University of Arizona excavated the site but did not find a satisfactory answer.

The ruins and the visitor center are open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. On exhibit are artifacts from the original excavations such as pottery, a powdered root called “Winter Fat” used for fevers, and a 12-foot necklace with 3,295 beads. There are also bracelets made of shells traded from Indians who lived near the Gulf of California.

Other intriguing ruins in this vicinity include Montezuma Castle, 50 miles southeast of flagstaff off I-17. It is 27 miles from Tuzigoot. Although the ruins can no longer be entered by visitors, they are worthwhile visiting because they are considered some of the best remains of cliff dwellings in the country. Visitors always question the relationship between the cliff dwellings and Montezuma, but there is no connection and there never was a castle.

The Sinagua Indians built these five-story apartments high up in a limestone cliff recess between 1100 and 1400 A.D. The magnificent 20 rooms, along with another “castle” 100 yards to the west that contained 45 rooms, required three centuries to construct and provided a home to approximately 200 Sinaguas.

The rooms had small T-shaped doorways and heavy wooden beams chopped from sycamore trees. The upper-story floor and ceilings were constructed from thatching of grasses and shrubs which were then covered with mud.

A large dump at the base of the cliff was found to contain discarded tools, broken pottery and remains of food such as corncoobs, squash and bean stems. These articles gave archaeologists an unwritten history of how the Indians lived.

Artifacts on display in the monument’s visitor center include basketry, weavings and tools.

Montezuma Well, 9.5 miles by road northeast of the castle, is a huge limestone sink with continuous water flows of 1.5 million gallons a day. Pueblo Indians used the lime-charged water to irrigate their crops. The sink is measured today at 470 feet in diameter and 55 feet in depth.

Indian history buffs may also want to visit Tonto, Walnut Canyon (300 small 13th century cliff dwellings), Navaho Canyon de Chelly, and Wupatki National Monuments to see a variety of spectacular cliff, pueblo and cave dwellings occupied between 1000 and 1600 A.D.

On display in adjoining museum are sample of textiles, pottery, jewelry, tools, needles, religious items and other artifacts from the Indians’ lives.