

Review: Cedar Mesa: A Place Where Spirits Dwell

By David Peterson

Reviewed by [Joyce Metzger](#)
Arcadia, Florida, USA

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David Petersen; photographs by Branson Reynolds. *Cedar Mesa: A Place Where Spirits Dwell*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002. 86 pp. ISBN 0-8165-2234-0 (paper). \$US13.95. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Cedar Mesa in Utah is a vaguely forbidding and intimidating landscape of sky, space, stone, and sun. Life struggles to survive rugged terrain and severe changes in weather. Here one can revel in wild country and personal freedom while recognizing a dignity in the landscape that must be fostered and preserved within the natural wildness.

Cedar Mesa proves difficult to get to, but for these collaborators, writer and photographer, the result of their effort is well worth any hardship they endured as they share this uniquely magical, high-mesa desert maze of vertical-walled, vertigo-thrilling canyons animated by towering, bigger-than-life sandstone formations known as hoodoos.

This is a surreal place filled with tantalizing, frozen-in-time, rock-hard waves surrounded by sweet, clean air and profound silence. This is pinion-pine/juniper "pygmy forest" ecology with sage brush and glimpses of evening primrose, Indian paintbrush, sego lily, sacred nature, monkey flower, yucca, columbine, and sunflowers.

One can enjoy the solitude, magnetic shadow pull, and fragrant pinions while watching for deer, rabbits, ground squirrels, lizards, snakes, desert tortoise, cliff swallows, canyon wrens, swifts, hawks, falcons, eagles, vultures, and iridescent ravens. As rodents scurry by, brushing the sagebrush, senses become attuned to desert sounds and imagination listens for Anasazi ghosts and Ed Abbey's humorous spirit who, most sense, still haunts the vertical sandstone columns that have eroded to resemble people, animals, and other worldly and magical beings. In this rarefied place, solitude befriends; it is not an enemy.

The tabletop mesa is high, sparsely timbered land covered by slow-growing, crusty lichen that aids in water retention while slowing wind erosion. Large expanses of weathered slick rock are weirdly eroded and natural depressions form catch basins for rainwater and snowmelts.

Cedar Mesa lies near the heart of the Colorado Plateau, which straddles the

legendary Four Corners region. One will view stone arches, windows, hoodoos, natural bridges, breathtaking precipices, hidden springs, moss-fringed pools, hanging gardens, and a treasure trove of pre-Columbian Indian ruins.

Directions are provided, but one must be bold to follow through the narrow cleft in the rim rock, skid and slide down a steep talus slope, then ease across the treacherous face of slick rock to a narrow ledge to find the entrance to a shallow rock shelter—a place where spirits dwell—the spirits of those known as the Anasazi.

Pottery shards litter alcove floors, natural time museums, where gentle growers of corn, beans, and squash once dwelled before the need for water drove them to abandon all they had ever known. Collapsed kivas whisper about clandestine ceremonies, but a more solid paw print marks the dust in this magical mindscape of petrified waves; that of a cougar who night haunts while headed for a slow trickle of sparkling water droplets which emerge from the sandstone wall. A spooky chimera exists between mind, Anasazi ghosts, nocturnal dream creatures, and this very real predator drawn by the tantalizing aroma of food and the life necessity of water.

Sipapu rises 220 feet and spans 268 feet. Kachina stands 210 feet with a span of 204 feet. Owachomo, the "little bridge" is 106 feet high and spans 180 feet. Each of the natural bridges is accessible by lizard-infested foot trails, or by an eight-mile, one-way loop road—Bridge View Drive—that leads to a roadside overlook.

This is magnificently wild country—land not for the timid, but for those who appreciate expanse, sky, and sun. Life is abundant here but should be treasured. All trace of human sojourners must be carried away, not left to clutter a fragile and pristine environment.

This descriptive panoramic overview of Cedar Mesa seeks to instill in readers a conviction of the importance of environmental protection for this area. This book is for an audience of concerned readers. David Petersen has won awards for excellence in outdoor journalism and other professional honors. Branson Reynolds has explored, studied, and photographed the landscapes, ancient ruins, wildlife, and native peoples of the American Southwest for 25 years. This book is the second collaboration between these two concerned environmentalists.

Readers are given the directions to Cedar Mesa, to some of the ghostly Anasazi ruins, and are warned about inherent dangers that can befall unwary footsteps. If you are merely inquisitive, order a copy of this book to enjoy

from your armchair. If you love challenges, set aside travel time and enjoy a spectacular natural wonder. Please remember, leave everything as you discovered it.

The cover for *Cedar Mesa: A Place Where Spirits Dwell* is colorful. This easy-to-hold book has 16 black and white photographs to satisfy the visual appetite as imagination celebrates a truly remarkable natural oasis.

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