

San Juan Basin Archaeological Society
a Colorado Non-Profit Corporation



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: March 24, 2026

Destination: Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum Tour

Leaders: Tammie and Joel Barger

Participants (13): Chris Anderson, Joel Barger, Tammie Barger, Rusty Chamberlin, Tom DeHudy, James (Jim) Horn, Lynn Hughes, Denise Lane, Mark McKibben, Michelle McKibben, Mary Morehead, Pete Varney, Tish Varney

Important Note: This Field Trip report is only intended to provide a very high-level overview of the field trip experience to encourage other members to visit the Cultural Center and to provide documentation for future tours. “Helpful Links” have been provided at the end of this document should you wish to learn more about the history and culture of the Southern Ute people on your own.

Remarks:

This field trip was structured to create both social and educational opportunities for SJBAS members. On the social side, nine of our trip members met at the Sky Ute Casino Resort Rolling Thunder Grill for lunch. The grill staff helped arrange more tables for us as needed so all members could socialize and share stories at one big table. Following lunch, given the nice weather, many chose to walk from the casino to the Cultural Center where we met our other members for the tour.

Our tour was led by Raelynn Frauenhoff – Museum Education and Outreach Coordinator. Raelynn began the tour by explaining the history of the museum itself including a detailed description of how the Southern Ute people and culture drove the architectural features of the building.



*Cultural Center & Museum
History and Architecture –
Raelynn’s introduction in the
Welcoming Hall*

The curved design of the building reflects the “Circle of Life”, a theme central to Ute life. The central conical form is constructed to allow it to glow inward by day and outward by night.

The main skylight terminates in a circle of glass, quartered into four shades: yellow (which represents east, springtime and infancy), red (south, summer and youth), black (west, fall and adulthood) and white (north, winter and old age).

The seven stripped pine logs gathered at the top by a steel collar supporting the structure represents the original seven Ute bands.

This introductory discussion also provided the early history of the Ute people. It is interesting to note that the Utes do not have a migration story. The Utes have always lived here in the mountains.



The tour continued into the main exhibition hall where Raelynn guided us through a series of stations arranged in chronological order. The first was the Ute Creation story (see “Helpful Links” below).

Next, stopping in an area highlighting rock art, Raelynn discussed the unwritten history of the Southern Utes and the focused efforts today to create a written language to preserve their language and history for future generations.



A few great stories here about shelters over time; from brush structures to tipis.

We learned how their construction, assembly and placement was all done by the women in the tribe.





Our next stop focused on the interactions with the Spaniards in the sixteenth century and how the Utes were one of the first Native American tribes to acquire horses. This enabled them to roam further from their home camps to hunt buffalo that migrated over the prairies. It also resulted in more interaction with other tribes.

An interactive display provided visualization of Ute treaties and agreements from 1849 to present which was our next topic. In short, it is a repeating story of agreements made and not kept that ultimately led the Southern Utes (Mouache and Caputa bands) agreeing to taking land into ownership under an allotment process as part of the Hunter Act in 1895.



The re-creation of a Southern Ute boarding school classroom provides the setting for a very somber and dark story about this era. The boarding school was part of a federal policy that sought to eradicate Indigenous cultures through education, resulting in significant trauma and loss for those involved. Having someone that lived it tell you about it was extremely impactful.



Our last tour discussion begins in the 1950's. Returning WWII veterans assist in drafting the Rehabilitation Plan to establish an economic plan for social welfare of the tribal membership. Today this plan provides for vocational rehabilitation, annex rehabilitation (housing, construction management and office space), community development and tribal services.

At this point Raelynn provided closing remarks and directed us to other areas of the Center that we could explore on our own.

We want to thank Raelynn for her very professional presentations and her time in answering our many questions. Many of the SJBAS participants had visited the Cultural Center and Museum on their own before. Their feedback was that the tour experience had been greatly enjoyed and that they had learned far more on the tour.

Just a few more pictures taken during the time on our own...



Tish views the KSUT radio station display.



The Cultural Center's Temporary Exhibits Room



Exploring the upper level of the tower.



While exploring on your own, watch out for lions!

Suggestions if trip is repeated: The pre-tour lunch at the Rolling Thunder Grill was scheduled to start at 11:30 AM with the Tour scheduled to begin at 1 PM. While we were not rushed for lunch we did decide to walk from the casino to the Cultural Center. The Grill was also more crowded for lunch than expected. We would recommend starting the lunch 15 minutes earlier in the schedule to allow for those variations.

The tour, as advertised, was scheduled for 1 hour. At the beginning of the tour Raelynn asked if we had any time limitations which we said that we did not. I think that allowed her to both spend more time on each topic and to answer more questions which was a big plus. If the trip is repeated, we may want to set the expectation that the tour may last up to 2 hours.

Prepared by: Tammie and Joel Barger

Helpful links:

Southern Ute Creation Story

<https://www.southernute-nsn.gov/history/ute-creation-story/>

Southern Ute Culture

<https://www.southernute-nsn.gov/culture/>

Southern Ute History

<https://www.southernute-nsn.gov/history/>

Southern Ute Chronology

<https://www.southernute-nsn.gov/history/chronology/>