

“Hard Place”



Several stories tall, these ancient ruins cling to vertical cliffs, in hope of *something*.

You’ve all heard it before. You know, the line about how tough things are, the line about an impossible situation, about being “between a rock and a hard place”.

It was a warm spring day, and I had just about had it with the climb up a steep, brushy, wooded slope, if you want to call it that. It was more like a tangled obstacle course, except that it seemed nearly vertical, and the loose soil beneath my feet made getting up through it even more frustrating, as it was two steps forward, slide back one. Annoying little bugs swarmed around my face and ears, but they kept me company and gave me something to yell at. They were the only creatures, I’m sure, that would have thought my sweat-soaked shirt and hat smelled nice. I was beginning to wonder if it was worth it, if all this work made any sense. It would be easier to turn around, and go back to the car, now miles down the deep canyon. My heart was pounding. I was trying to find some ruins.

I was well into the rugged *Sierra Ancha* (in Spanish, “wide mountains”), about 75 miles northeast of Phoenix. This remote range is one of the least explored archaeological areas in Arizona, and it is not hard to understand why. Deeply-incised canyons cut through massive layers of rock, and these in turn are coated with all kinds of thick vegetation – tall pine woods at the summit, right on down to the cactus-strewn canyon floors. Rattlesnakes abound, and who knows what other dangers, too – maybe the emotional ghosts of those who lived here and built my goal about 700 years ago. Whatever caused people to live in such a place must have been an intensely emotional thing, and I imagine that that emotion was *fear*.

And then I saw them. Right above me was one of the most spectacular sets of cliff-dwellings I had ever seen, there literally clinging to the massive rock cliffs above. They looked like they had just grown there, right out of the stone. My mind flashed on the connection between life and rocks, and here was another example. Only here it was humans that grew this place in the rocks, and I knew there were more such spots around that area, too. The rocks offered *protection*.

The *Sierra Ancha* are so rough and craggy because most of the rock there is very hard and tough, and consequently very resistant to erosion. In the area of these *Anchan Culture* cliff-dwellings, *quartzite* and *limestone* are the order of the day.

Quartzite is a *metamorphic rock*, meaning that the original has been changed by heat and pressure, in this case altering an old sandstone formation (left-over beach sands, possibly) into a much more durable rock unit. Limestone is a rock, also very unyielding, precipitated out of oceanic waters, and forms vertical cliffs in a lot of places where it occurs.

Both of these rocks point to a time when this part of what we now call Arizona lay along the shores of ancient seas lying to the west and south. It was not North America then, and what we now see as our landscape would have been around a billion years into the future.



Massive quartzite ramparts in the *Sierra Ancha*.

These rocks are collectively known to geologists as the *Apache Group*. Higher up in their section, you can also see layers of dark basalt, a volcanic rock that erupted way back then in various places, as the old setting went through some convulsive times.

Equivalent rock formations are found in and below the bottom of the Grand Canyon, and there they are approximately 5000 feet lower in elevation, near the Colorado River itself. Therefore, the rocks above that point, most all of those colorful layers now seen in the walls of the Grand Canyon, were once *on top of the Sierra Ancha* as well.

Because of massive uplift of the region, the younger rocks are now gone, and the innards are exposed.



The *Sierra Ancha*, along the left skyline, appear deceptively gentle in this view of them from the *Mazatzal Mountains*. *Roosevelt Lake* is in the foreground.

You can see these same rocks when you wind your way up State Route 288 (also known as the Young Road) from the valley floor, near the Salt River and Roosevelt Lake, to the upper reaches of the Sierra Ancha, near Aztec Peak, on the way to the small town of Young. In this stretch, you are going up through time.

My distress at the sweaty work-out turned to delight; my desperation turned to awe. Tough places, tough rocks, I mused. The Apache Group is still there because it is so hard to get at, and in turn, the dwellings of the ancients remain tucked within its depths, mostly untouched, for the same reason.

That the inhabitants of these ruins chose to live, and die, between the difficulties of the nearly impassible terrain below and the sheer walls of stone, demonstrates the incredibly fine line of life to which they clung, and the tenacity of nature itself.

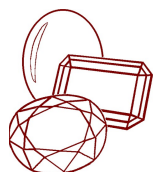
To learn more, visit www.gemland.com, go to the "Superstition Mountains" section, and click on "Sierra Ancha" on the map. That will initiate a series of images, together with geologic explanations, and you can even send any picture you like to your friends as an E-postcard for FREE!

----- *Richard Allen*

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*At right: natural Arizona Peridot and 22K Gold
gent's ring by GemLand © 2006*



by Richard Allen

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