

Photographing Arizona's Landscape
An experience beyond words, you just have to be there.
~ Frederick Lee ~

Arizona sits in the most southwestern part of the America's Southwest, an area famous for its distinctive landform and unique vegetation. It is, after all, the Grand Canyon state with its iconic Saguaro cactus. Early explorers of the land have discovered that within a few hours traveling, the area's diversity reflects the arid desert of Mexico to the lush coniferous forest of Canada. One strong reason to put Arizona as a photographic destination is that most major sites are within driving distances and can be covered in a week or longer. Driving in Arizona (except in the City of Phoenix) is pleasant and unhurried. North of Flagstaff, the route is very scenic with elevations varying between five to seven thousand feet. Although the key attractions are centered on the unusual landforms, yet each site has its unique quality and poses different photographic challenges. I have always love the mystic images of slot canyons; its surreal colours and sublime shadows. But the experience of being clustered within narrow canyon walls is beyond words. By contrast, it is a different feeling when dwarfed by the majestic sandstone formations in Monument Valley Navajo Reservation. For me, what started as a photographic endeavour ended in a greater enrichment in human experience; an engagement with nature on its own terms.

Antelope Canyon is located along Highway 98 on the way to Page, the northern-most town in Arizona. The Mecca of slot canyon, yet you can easily miss it as it is not marked on most maps. The best landmark is Page power station with its three chimneys. There are two parts to the canyon; the Upper and Lower Antelope Canyon, both discharges into Lake Powell. Driving north, you can see road signs leading to the respective canyon after passing the power station. The Navajo folks at the Upper Canyon offer two types of tours, one for tourist and a longer one for photographers. Slot canyon photography is challenging on both the technical and aesthetic fronts. Since lighting inside the canyon depends mainly on reflections, it is difficult to assess the effect these have on the sandstone rock surfaces. One lesson that I have learned is that the camera's sensors does see a lot more of the colour spectrum than the human eyes can. This is especially true on the blue end. Experiment with the White Balance setting and use the histogram for optimal exposure control. Strong highlight can ruin your image, so the overexposed highlight warning is a very useful feature in this situation. Personally, I find the aesthetic challenge the greater between the two. But first we must locate the potential areas and this is where local knowledge comes in very useful. A photographer who is familiar with the location can point you to potential spots and intimate their salient features that are



Antelope Canyon, looking up



Near entrance, Antelope Canyon



WB: Incandescent



WB: Cloudy

not obvious to a passing glance. I had the good fortune of meeting Jackson Bridges of Overland Canyon Tours in Page.

Being a photographer, he was able to point me to just the right places in Canyon 'X'. I really needed it as the five-hour tour passes much quicker than expected. A final thought on slot canyon photography; don't pass those dark areas too quickly, allow your eyes to adjust for a few minutes and take another look. You'll be surprised how much more there is. Engage nature on its own terms.

Monument Valley is a visual splendor of timeless forms and magnitude. Hidden in obscure corners are the most unexpected landforms carved through millions of years. The Valley is located on the Arizona side of the border with Utah, you actually have to drive north into Utah before heading south into the reservation. The scenic drive along Highway 163 is a foretaste of greater sights to come. I was tempted several times to stop by the road side just to record the scene but was put back by safety considerations. There is a seventeen-mile, self-drive track which is passable to a family sedan. But you would like to negotiate it carefully because of the rough terrain and poor road holding that the sand and small pebbles offer. However, the better views are not on this track. You need to hire a Navajo guide to bring you to these places and I did just that; no regret at all. There are just so many magnificent geologic formations (the local Navajo calls them monuments) that to photograph each individually would require a few days. I am not aware of sunrise tours, but there are tours that include the sunset hours. Be mindful that during the winter months, the sun sets early (about 5.00 pm) and quickly. To display sufficient details of the monuments, composition is best confined to no more than three of them within a frame. Natural lighting plays an important role here, so be prepared to stay after nightfall for sunset shots. Since working distances are quite large, mid-focal zoom lenses (about 24-85mm) work best. Again, for a short visit, take advantage of local knowledge. The local Navajo guides know the times and places for the best shots. You want to be nice to them in some practical ways.



Monument Valley, Left Mitten



Monument Valley, Mittens and Merrick

The success of a photographic trip depends largely on one's preparation. If you plan to drive, work out all your routes beforehand and include rest stops for long journeys. I have been using a mapping GPS receiver this past year and have found it more convenient than paper maps. I still carry them though. Next, decide on a list of basic equipment and accessories you are expected to use. Anticipate the number of shots you expect to take and carry a memory device large enough to accommodate all the images. I prefer to carry additional CF cards in the field and download them in the evening when back in the hotel room. There are just too much to contend with in the field than to have to worry about downloading into portable memory devices. With stuff like batteries, you would need spare. Make all your accommodations and tour arrangements well in advance as most National Parks in the US have very limited facilities. In some cases, bookings as far as a year in advance are needed. Planning also includes having the appropriate clothing and footwear for the season. The best times of the day to photograph are also the times when normal folks are having their breakfasts and dinners. You may not like to deprive yourself of basic creature comfort.

This trip to Arizona was my first. I made extensive pre-trip search of photographic sites on the internet about these locations. I made notes of the exact spots and the best angles. As an example, not all view points along the Southern Rim of the Grand Canyon are good for sunrise and sunset shots. Viewing images by others can indicate a lot about the view to expect and the lighting angle. This saves a lot of time when at the location and improve the yield of keepers. My trip to Arizona began months before I left and the experience continues to linger and endure in my images long after it ended. Best of all, I can now share them with family and friends.

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