

AL-KHEMEDIASTUDIOS

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Life persists in the desert, and leaves it's mark on those who come to witness it.



Desert wonderings a photographers thoughts

By Tyler Kuhn

I'm sitting at home nursing the straightened remains of a dislocated finger... wondering what to do and it seems only to appropriate to do something that requires extensive finger dexterity, so it is

time for a new entry. My last 'blog' entry discussed a christmas vacation a few years ago, so why not continue the trend with thoughts from this past christmases adventure.

Amber and I decided that this christmas would be spent among the warm deserts and plateaus of the southwest US, rather than back up in the frigid North of Canada.





Of course, this plan, although sound in principle clearly identifies one large misconception that we both possessed. Even in the southern US deserts, there is winter. It may not be the Canadian North, but the temperature is frequently below zero, even during the day. Nowhere did this become more apparent than our brief stop at Bryce Canyon National Park. The morning we arrived it was a brisk -17°C , but the day before it had been -27°C , much colder than our hometown of Whitehorse, 6,000 kilometers to the north.

There is an advantage to winter in the desert. There are few people in these national parks, which receive millions of visitors each year. The satisfaction of wandering around Zion, Bryce Canyon or Arches national parks and seeing but a few adventurous wanderers is in my mind worth the frozen water bot-

ties, frigid nights and ice covered roads.

We visited a lot of amazing spots on our christmas road trip, but it's about the last stop on our journey that I would like to do a little reminiscing.

Back in my undergraduate days, a good friend of mind pointed me towards the book, *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey. This is one of those books that sticks with you, and rapidly become a personal favourite. But it was all a bit distant from my real life and experiences, as at the time I had never even seen a desert, aside from the Carcross Desert, the self-proclaimed "Smallest Desert in the World".

Now that I've had the opportunity to wander through some of the areas described in Edward Abbey's book, it is rapidly climbing the list

of all-time favourites once again. But there is a particular passage that has stuck with me above all others.

"There are the inevitable pious Midwesterners who climb a mile and a half under the desert sun to view Delicate Arch and find only God ("Gol-dangit Katherine where's my light meter, this glare is turrrible"), and the equally inevitable students of geology who look at the arch and see only Lyell and the uniformity of nature. You may therefore find proof for or against His existence. Suit yourself. You may see a symbol, a sign, a fact, a thing without meaning or a meaning which includes all things."

p. 36

Delicate Arch is one of those places on this planet, that inevitably become more than the sum of what they are. Why that is, I don't





have an answer, but perhaps it has something to do with the break from the ordinary.

Two parts of Edward Abbey's quote are particular striking to me.

Before wandering over to the world of Biology, I was a geologist, and worked as one for three years. This world view leads inevitably to a love of rocks and rock formations. And Delicate Arch is no exception. I can see in the Arch the slow accumulation of windblown sand, layered in time and transformed to stone, only to be whittled away by more wind and water. But there is so much more to the Arch than the process which gave it its

existence. Or at least, I would like to think so.

The other striking section is the quotation that Abbey reproduces. And this one again has a personal connection. Beyond working as a geologist and now as a biologist/paleontologist, I love photography. The ability to let other people view the world through your eyes, even just for a moment, is a marvelous thing. But the truth of photography is often not seen in any one picture. It is the story of the making of the picture. And as such I must retell the story of the making of one of my pictures.

The picture in question is a "standard shot of Delicate Arch". I say this because in some form or another this photograph has been taken by countless millions of people.

When you arrive at Arches National Park, or are reading a guide book in order to plan a trip, these words will inevitably come up: "You can't visit Arches National Park without viewing Delicate Arch at sunset."

And this is exactly what I did. Amber and I spent the day wandering on deserted treacherously snow covered trails, but as the sun dropped in the sky, we stepped in with the masses and started the pilgrimage to Delicate Arch.

We were a bit earlier than the bulk of the people, arriving before the sunsetters and after the departure of the daytime viewers. When we arrived at the natural amphitheater,

there were a couple photographers set up, large format cameras carefully placed. Film and light meters and black bags and warm jackets meticulously laid out around them, in preparation for the 'moment', three hours in the making. I would later discover that one of these photographers, the one perched on a narrow sloping ledge above a 100ft drop was one of Utah's pre-eminent landscape photographers, Tom Till. If you have seen a landscape photograph of Utah in a publication, you've seen a Tom Till photograph.

The third to arrive, and in good company, I set up shop on a nice little ledge of rock, with a comfortable spot to sit on, and a suitable distance between me and the 100ft drop mentioned before. I guess I'm not ready to sacrifice myself entirely for that one chances at the perfect angle... at least not yet.

As the temperature dropped, and the sun dipped low, more and more





people began arriving. But I was in the zone... watching the beauty of the changing light play across the red stone and white snow, visualizing my photograph.

Eventually I did look around and was shocked by the sight behind me. As the third photographer to arrive that evening, I had a prime front row seat, but spread out behind me covering every surface suitable for a seat or stable enough for a tripod was more photogra-

phers and fancy camera equipment than you could find in a high-end camera store.

As I said, I was about to do the photographic equivalent of a pilgrimage to the Holy City, photograph Delicate Arch in the setting sun light.

In some ways, it may seem to cheapen the experience, but again returning to the Biblical reference, just because this event has been a

part of so many peoples lives, does not make it any less significant to my own. And in fact it may make it more significant.

Photography, in it's purest form is about viewing through the eyes of someone else, and here, amidst a forest of Slik and Manfrotto, each image will be similar, and yet personal, an expression of the person pressing the shutter release.

I can now be happy knowing that I have followed in the footsteps of many and laid down my interpretation of an event 100 million years in the making.

