

The Essential Landscape The Rest of the Story

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Every image tells a story, but no image tells the whole story. Some say images take a 3-dimensional scene and render it in a 2-dimensional rectangle. Often ignored is the fourth missing dimension – time. No one image tells the story of the events leading up to and following the blink of the shutter.

Truly this is a double-edged sword. The image has the power to distill, to enhance, to place emphasis, and to eliminate superfluous elements. Still some things, some stories, need to be told. An image may be worth a thousand words, which is often enough, but not always.

What we present may mean one thing to us who created it, yet something entirely different to others. A beautiful composition standing on its own merit is certainly a worthy goal in itself but in the telling of a story can be just as limiting as it is liberating.

This is not to say that an image should be explained; in fact I hold the opposite to be true: I believe that the greatest joy we can experience from a work of art is derived from intuition rather than from analysis. Rather than explain the image, I am suggesting that in some cases some images are enhanced by the intimate knowledge of their context.

A privilege often reserved only to those who know the artist personally is that of the story – the where, the when, the what, the why, the who, and the how – the smells in the air, the chill, the swirling songs of wrens in the crags, the distant howls of coyotes, that near-death experience just moments before or after, the sense of being lost, of being alone, of laughing, of crying, of yearning, the conversation or the silence.

The image stands mute witness – reducing the story to its visual elements alone. A good image will retain all the essentials of the moment – the mood, the light, hints of the thoughts and feelings. But sometimes, well, sometimes that's just not enough.

Keeping a sporadic journal and writing about memorable moments, whether associated with images or not, is often an exercise in discovery for me. While I find myself vividly remembering specific images - key moments and events, it is not until I come to write about them some time later that I realize how much more remains hidden in the back of my mind. Rendering the story in words is every bit as pleasurable and meaningful as devising a visual composition and studying the details of a fascinating scene.

With no small amount of trepidation, I decided to share one such journal entry.

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Glen Canyon, October 2004

When Steve called to ask if I was up for a hike into one of the lower canyons of the Escalante I was thrilled. He mentioned it has become his favorite canyon, and coming from Steve this is about the highest endorsement for a canyon as I can imagine. Steve has seen and experienced more of the Colorado Plateau than most people ever will. He is also one of the best hiking companions you will ever find – at the same time a guide, a mentor, and a good friend.

After the long drive down Hole-in-The-Rock Road we popped a couple of cold cans of Cream Soda and took our time arranging our backpacks. The day was cool and bright – a perfect autumn day in the desert. The silence disturbed only by the occasional chit-chat, the rustle of various gear stuffed into the packs, and the calls of curious ravens hovering above.



One thing I always appreciated about time with Steve is that everything becomes part of the experience – every activity, whether technical or mundane, whether in remote wild surroundings or just loafing around camp is given due time and attention. Nothing is rushed. Being in a sacred place (and to Steve and me this certainly is) there is joy to be found in everything.

The hike down canyon is typical of this environment – a wide wash growing ever steeper and narrower as we move towards its main artery, the arid and barren quickly giving way to hidden riparian treasures, alive and verdant among the precipitous walls. After a couple of hours Steve points to a giant alcove a short way off the canyon floor and declares “We’re home!”

The alcove floor is covered in soft welcoming sand, its huge arc providing ample shelter from the potential thunderstorm, and a group of large smoothly-curved boulders make for surprisingly comfortable seating. A closer examination of one of the boulders reveals a small but obvious bowl – a metate - a shallow bowl used to grind corn and other grains into flour. As is often the case when coming upon evidence of ancient cultures I try to imagine what it was like to have lived here long ago. Little imagination is needed here – the place had probably not changed much since. The real difference is that then one would not have had to leave at a given time.

We take our time to set up camp, then put together light packs and continue down canyon for the afternoon. Steve promises that the best part is right around the corner and I am filled with anticipation. Indeed I did not have long to wait. As the canyon rounds a corner we find ourselves at the edge of a deep pool nestled between steep red walls, the crystal clear water curving around the next bend towards more unseen wonders. The sun is now low in the sky and lights up the opposite cliff, casting a warm golden glow on the inner walls. We stand in awe for a few seconds to admire the scene and the silence. We then switch to Neoprene socks and Steve motions me to go in first.

Entering water is always a jarring and alien experience for the first few seconds. Slowly and carefully we tread the water, scaring up crawdads and water striders. The water is waist-deep in places and we are grateful no swimming is required.

The pool gives way to a large alcove. There is now a steady flow of clear shallow water flowing in smooth fluted pathways along the exposed sandstone floor. The passage is about 20-30 yards wide in most places, with walls stretching up about 500ft on either side. Each alcove protects a small sandy hill, covered in soft grasses, small groves of scrub oak, the odd sacred datura, rabbitbrush, and other staples of this magical desert.

At this point we decide to head back to camp for the evening with great anticipation of returning the next day.

Back at camp we cook a hot dinner. Night time temperatures are just chilly enough to soothe the lungs with each breath but still afford comfortable warmth inside the sleeping bag. Before going to sleep I set up my camera in the darkness, pointing towards the alcove opening, hoping to record the star trails in the distance.

I have not slept through a full night in over fifteen years and this night is no exception. Around 3AM I crawled out of my sleeping bag to close the shutter before the dawn light. I was surprised to see the wall on the other side of the canyon emitting a faint glow. The moon was rising behind the alcove and though I could not see it, its pale light illuminated the canyon quite a ways in and I just sat there on the large boulder by the ancient metate, enjoying the silence and the peace. This was no time to sleep. There was too much to admire.

True to our state of mind and reverence for the place, we took our time in the morning. The sounds and scents of the desert slowly awakening mixed well with the freshly brewed cup of coffee, the hot sweet oat-meal, and the chilly air.

As it warmed up, we put some provisions in light packs and headed down canyon again, eager to see what beauty waits beyond.

After several sweeping turns we came to a long corridor. The sun now illuminating a small portion of the top of the wall reflected in the shallow water, making a path of pure gold below our feet. The walls are now straight and rise hundreds of feet to either side and we are but two diminutive figures in awe of the monumental scene – an immense cathedral in a scale that defies comprehension.

We walk steeped in magic for what seems like hours, though time has become all but meaningless and imperceptible here. Alcoves, corridors, grottos, the occasional surprising dip into quicksand, all in slow succession leaves us feeling saturated, all our senses on high alert to take in as much as we can from the place and ultimately giving up and just savoring each moment.

Finally the canyon opens up and we arrive at one of man’s most vile incursions into the Colorado Plateau – the reservoir that drowned Glen Canyon and in a twist of cruel irony was named after the first man to oppose it - a sobering reminder that things are

not as they used to be, and also that this is as far as we can walk. We turn our backs on the “cesspool”, all too eager to walk back into the womb of the glowing walls.

The camp ritual repeats that evening and the following morning. I have one more night left before I need to head back and we decide to hike out of the canyon, move the vehicles up the road a ways, and hike back out to a prominent ridge above the Escalante River where we hoped to photograph the sunrise the next day.

The hike takes us down a gentle sandy slope and onto a large sandstone plateau. There are no marks here, just a sea of slickrock. Every so often an easy-to-miss cairn signals the trail but otherwise there's nothing but gently curving rock in all directions. Within an hour or so we reach the edge of a tall cliff overlooking the confluence of the Escalante River and Coyote Gulch, many hundreds of feet below. Not too far away a large slab of rock has slightly separated from the cliff wall, creating a narrow passage to a large sand dune below that is sometimes used by hikers as a shortcut into Coyote Gulch. The plan is to sleep under the open sky on the flat sandstone, right on the rim and set up at the edge to photograph at dawn.

In the distance I notice thunderstorm clouds gathering above the Kaiparowits plateau but Steve is not concerned. Nightfall finds us in our sleeping bags, using our backpacks for pillows, with miles of sandstone stretching in 3 directions and a steep cliff behind us.

Around 10PM I woke up to a strange sensation. Still drowsy I finally realized it was raining. I stuck my head out just in time to be blinded by lightning strike no more than a mile away. This was not good. We were exposed with nowhere to hide – an approaching storm to one side and a huge drop-off to the other. I shook Steve and yelled that we need to get the heck out of there quickly (ok, I didn't use “heck”).

It was obvious the storm will be on us soon and in the absence of trees or prominent formations we were the prime targets for a lightning strike. Steve ran towards the edge to check for potential hiding places and asked me to wait so he wouldn't have to carry his pack until he found a spot. I used the time to capture a quick shot of the approaching lightning.

Within minutes Steve was back with the bad news – there is nowhere to hide. Considering our options and the rain that was now coming down hard we decided our best bet is to try and squeeze through the crack down the cliff, and hunker down at the top of the large sand dune where we will not be the most prominent objects around, nor too close to the cliff wall (which can conduct the lightning strike).

The rain had turned into a downpour by now. Lightning was hitting ever closer and the following thunder rang loud in our ears, reverberating off the canyon walls for several seconds after each strike. At the edge of the cliff we realized our large backpacks would not fit through the crack. We grabbed our sleeping bags and plastic tarps and with great effort squeezed our way through the wedge-shaped passage. Out the other end we moved away from the wall, and wrapped ourselves in the sleeping bags and tarps which were soaked and barely kept us warm.

We were now right above the confluence, with Stevens Arch looming across the canyon and the Escalante flowing far below. It was raining hard. Every few seconds the entire canyon was lit in a flash of bright pink as a spider web of cloud-to-cloud lightning shattered the darkness, followed by an immense explosion of thunder bouncing and echoing off the canyon walls. We were awed and terrified at the same time. We joked about the very real possibility of not making it out but feeling fortunate to be witnessing what was for both of us one of the most amazing spectacles we ever encountered in this place.

Though shivering violently and worried about what may still be in store for the night, I still could think of little else but the beautiful fury of the storm unfolding in front of me. I didn't want to miss a single lightning strike - the instant searing itself into my memory – bright pink light, jagged webs in the sky and the sandstone monoliths flashing out of the darkness below and vanishing the following instant in a massive explosion of thunder. The show lasted for hours.

Around 3AM the rain had slowed to a trickle and lightning strikes were far enough between that we were confident the storm had moved far enough and we were out of immediate strike danger. There was still the very real danger of hypothermia though. We were cold and morning was still hours away. We decided to try to hike out.

After fighting our way up the crack and back to the slickrock ledge we examined the map and tried to determine our bearing. There were obviously no footprints or path on the sandstone to follow. We hoped to spot the cairns in the darkness and started following the compass, dead reckoning.

To further complicate things, our vehicles were parked at the end of a narrow dirt road that is perpendicular to Hole-In-The-Rock Road. Missing the exact intersection with the parking area, we could continue walking past it for miles without ever realizing it.

Knowing it took us about an hour to walk to the edge from the moment we got on the sandstone we decided to walk the same amount of time and reassess.

The hour passed. We did not see a single cairn or anything that looked like the sandy path to the parking area. Concerned that we might walk right past the cars we decided to stay put and reassess at first light. However staying put also meant staying cold and exposed. Anything we may have otherwise used for a fire was soaked from the rain. We finally discovered a pack rat nest under a sandstone ledge that was full of dry twigs. We "borrowed" some of them (Steve left the local inhabitant a small pile of pine nuts in exchange) and were able to start a fire. Knowing the twigs will not last us long we managed to set fire to a large bush that was half dead. The dry twigs generated enough heat for it to catch despite being wet. This kept us somewhat warm for the next couple of hours.

As the dawn light began to appear we decided to walk up to the top of a nearby sandstone dome to survey the area and see if we can tell where we were. Cold and tired, we were dreading, though still reluctant to admit, we may be lost and the thought of having to haul our packs for hours before reaching Hole-In-The-Rock, and then back out to the vehicles was not a pleasant one.

Filled with gloom we shouldered our packs (now much heavier with our soaked sleeping bags) and slowly ascended the sandstone slope. There at the top were our cars, a mere 200 yards away.

We were stunned for a second to realize we bivouacked so close to our vehicles and never realized it. We exchanged looks and burst out laughing, the weight of the night's events lifting instantly. Now looking at the rising sun we noticed the slickrock plateau in front of us had thousands of little water pockets. As the sun lit the sky red, the water reflected the clouds dotting the landscape with iridescent red spots as far as the eye could see – yet another marvel neither of us had seen before.

The drive back home is now a blur. My mind was so overloaded with the events of the trip and lack of sleep that time and distance compressed into the moment before and the moment after. By the time I got home I couldn't even tell the story to my wife. The following day I found myself sitting at my desk at work with my mind still flashing images of the golden canyons, the lightning and thunder, and the glowing puddles at sunrise. Around me were cloth cubicle walls and people going about their business; people who may never know the sensation a harrowing night in the canyons. I felt out of place. More than anything I wanted to jump in my car and go back and do it over again.

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Guy Tal resides in Utah, where most of the Colorado Plateau's breathtaking grandeur can be found, and where issues of preservation and land-use are among the most prominent on the political agenda. Guy's large format photography can be viewed on his website at <http://scenicwild.com>.

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