

Dare To Be Blessed

"Who ever loved ~ that loved not at first sight?"

Shakespeare c 1600's.

At first glance, I knew the fantastic image I saw was simply superb! A two-page spread in a coffee table photography book sang its glory.

A ghostly, early morning shot of a dark arch, belly lit by the early morning sun's flare like a scar. In the background, three towers - the two nearest were medium gray whereas the one farther back was light gray. The foreground elliptical arch was large and horizontal. In counterpoint, a medium colored tower had a smaller, vertical elliptical arch, without the sun's scar.

A provocative challenge worthy of any truly fascinated digital photographer trying to capture an award-winning shot. Where did the original shooter stand? Will the light be the same?

And so, began a blessed day...

The night before, I was sleeping on the ground amidst juniper in one of the few camping spots within a short distance of this arch. Poor plan, if allergic to juniper!

Up before dawn, headlights trying to pierce the black road ahead, wary of a wayward deer. Loaded backpack on, the stumbling trek back across a hill, careful with each step, finally finding a place for the tripod. The day before, a careful effort estimated where this provocative shot was taken. Simply set up 150 yards from the arch, then shoot the gorgeous sunrise. Soon, I would reproduce a master's image...

Unfortunately, I was not the only one who wanted a shot.

Pretty soon, I heard voices. Several people, with point-and-shoot cameras, came to the arch below me. Standing in front of the arch, chattering like monkeys, I was reminded of a jungle scene where quarreling, hairy orangutans got in a squabble.

Sometime later, when they finally disbursed, without so much as even a by your leave, I was able to get this shot of at Canyonlands National Park, near Moab, Utah.



Dawn's Welcome

Disappointed with the morning's progress, let's head for the next photo op.

This time, at midday, I first thought,

"There's going to be no need for care required to get across Mesa Arch trail."

But, this new trail wasn't marked. If the photographer hadn't noted features ahead in a book, it would be hard to find. Park the car, walk along the road, and a faint footpath disappears into the sage. Do we have everything? All the camera gear. Water and energy supplies. A good idea of where we're goin'.

A faint, unmarked trail softly disappeared through sage amidst more pungent, stunted juniper. Camera gear and water safely packed, a precarious trek began. In virtually no time, habitation sign was lost; then, even the dim trail seemed to disappear.

Clamoring carefully over slickrock, watching each footfall for secure, safe balance, the adventure began... winding from rock strewn wash bottoms, across eroding valley shoulders and back, amidst a small copse of juniper which obscured distant vision, steady progress was made. Rarely, a distant crow could be heard cawing. Or a rabbit, comfortably basking in shadow, might swiftly seek another, more distant sanctuary.

Finally, the mesa's edge appeared. From this point, our eye seemed to sweep away, out into the shimmering haze of distant vistas, along lonely, isolated mesas, and then, down to a faint, shimmering white border around the distant Green River's deep canyon. Spring thunderstorms were part of mid-day setting. Near the horizon, thunder heads were beginning to build. Far above, faint stringers of cirrus clouds seemed to play point-counterpoint, creating a mosaic pattern of white in an otherwise blue sky.

A towering bluff perhaps 500 yards away, a mile above sea level and some 300 feet high, loomed at the head of the canyon. Below the bluff, cut back by water into a cavelike area over millions of years, were several embayments. Without binoculars, I sat for quite some time, simply studying the area.

The massive, cliff-forming bluff was carved as a thick sandstone with a nearly vertical face. A series of sand and shale beds formed a steep slope beneath.

Each embayment had been cut away by rockfall over the millennia. A few hours after noon, the Sun's shadow already was creeping down slope below the cliff, making it hard to find the goal. Used to the outdoors for half a century, any trail to the area of interest seemed almost trifling. Man, this is going to be some challenge...

At first, there simply did not appear to be a marked trail to this semi-cave.

Experience said simply sit, study more carefully, then pick logical trail alternatives to access this distant cave. Other experience implied a rather precarious hike. It seemed wise to forego our heavy camera pack; in the wrong circumstance, this pack could tip uncertain balance. There was no pressing need to end up a terrible splatter at the base of this precipitous cliff.

With just camera carefully secured, a faint trail, rarely as wide as a footprint, led downward. With 200 feet of drop in 1500 feet of traverse, on a 45° slope, it quickly became apparent, if you wanted to see what was ahead, stand still. If you simply wanted to move along the trail, focus *only* on each step, test any rock you think precarious, watch for shale that might slide out from under you, then *carefully* put your little foot. At first, one foot step; then another; then another...

After a while, near the bottom of these shale/sand stringers, another trail appeared, this time mostly across shale, fairly well established, leading upward, but still away from the cave of interest. Grateful for safety's blessing, this trail would eventually take us into shadows beneath another, adjacent cave.

Now, it was climbing time. When the trail got to the base of a massive cliff, a small, steep bluff obscured vision ahead. The arduous trek and final climb seemed to say,

"When you get to the top, take off your outer shirt, then it's time to puff and blow, before the emotional impact of the Anasazi remnant and view really begin..."

While standing at Mesa Arch, I thought I was seeing one of the finest sights in Canyonlands. That was simply not so.

When I reached the top, I looked down on a circular structure standing about knee-high and 20 feet across with an opening to the southwest. Flat stones had

been piled one on another,. With the opening near the cliff edge, solid sandstone underlay below. Perhaps an hour had elapsed since the trail study began. Yet, in just an instant, time seemed to compress in this sacred space.

The climb was arduous. Sitting at the back of the cave, looking across this ancient Anasazi structure, listening to profound silence only broken by an occasional ravens caw magnified by the cave, I seem transported far back in time and to another space.

The trials of dawn photography, tribulations of descent and climb on this ancient carapace - all seemed to melt away as a sense of pre-eminent peace, a deep feeling of blessing began.

Forty years ago, Neil Armstrong, upon landing on the Moon, uttered these immortal words - "*One Small Step for Man, One Giant Leap for Mankind!*"

A thousand years ago, ancient Anasazi leaving no written record, created a holy place. I began to wonder, "With a spring less than a mile away across the mesa top, how and why did they live here? Surely, they had to carry water just for survival. This is early summer; what would it have been like to brave an aching cold winter in this remote, hidden place?"

For me, the effect from this singular place would create a lasting impression...

*"Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by..."*

@c ~1943, Robert Frost

I was not in a wood. I was in high, semiarid desert. I was not deserted. But time passed before this deep peace began to focus many blessings I would receive that day.

A seemingly disastrous beginning smoothly transitioned to an evocative life experience of the very rarest quality. I was given the strength, courage, and vision to see this Anasazi structure. Others, not quite as blessed, would never be able to make the trail and live such an experience in this sacred place.

However, if I could bring back, on then create a good picture, perhaps "I would take the one less traveled by..." and share this blessing with others!



Anasazi Pleasure

As the car took us back toward Moab, what were tall clouds became what Tony Hillerman calls Male Rains. The nucleus of the storm cloud formed about noon over dry canyons abutting the Colorado River near Moab. By the time it trailed dark blue shadows across the Colorado, it had built into a tower more than a mile from its sparkling white top to a flat, dark threatening base. It crossed the Green River at late afternoon, growing fast. Fierce internal updrafts swiftly pushed its cold cap above thirty thousand feet. Dark rain fell from the black base as the falling sun burned billowing cloud tops gold. Near sunset, dazzling golden tendrils enhanced this gorgeous spectacle. Rainfall's edge became a shimmering halo. Finally, an incredible rainbow seemed to focus the sky's enchanting light.

The sharp smell of fresh rain brought Star Gazer's flaring nostrils up and around, pointedly searching for, then finding all the fresh, soul-encompassing majesty... as he thought, "Today, the Gods are blessing our land!"

Bold lightening flares, thunder's sharp crash, and slashing silver knives of rain hailed the storm rushing across the valley in late-evening a thousand years ago. Young Star Gazer sat in a stone circle at the exquisite, hidden granary as water dripped steadily from the overhang and swiftly flashed through a wash below.

From end to end, north to south, along the eastern edge of Island in the Sky, rainbows began their delightful late evenings flirtatious dance. It seemed everywhere my eye turned, another rainbow graced an elegant Red Rock vision. It would become a case, as Frost said, of

*"And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood"*



Storm Across the Valley...

When I got home and assembled this gorgeous, handheld panorama, almost instantly, I knew its name. I can even hear the title sung in the inimitable voice John Denver shared with us those many glorious years...

*There's a storm across the valley, clouds are rollin' in
The afternoon is heavy on your shoulders...*

John Denver, Back Home Again, ©1974

The canyon beneath you falls away that same thousand feet. The jeep trail is actually entrance to Shafer Canyon, beginning of a long, tortuous, beckoning White Rim Trail that encircles Island in the Sky. Dead Horse Point looms in the distance.

But it's this scene's dramatic beauty which markedly changes the day's tenor.

In the distance, down the canyon bottom and beside a canyon tributary to the Colorado River, one's eye inevitably finds to the distant blessing of a rising storm. As evenings shadow begins to dance across this valley, the rainbow's arc seems to say,

"Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the *rainbow* appears in the clouds,
I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind."

Genesis 9: 14-15, NIV

I did not know God spoke of rainbows in this way...

In a practical way, this scene wants me to take White Rim Trail, leading me into the unknown and deepening my lasting communion with nature. In an ethereal way, the rainbow is asking me to take covenant with all living creatures.

Again, Frost comes to mind

"And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair..."

Far to the south, another rainbow, double this time, kept pulling me down the other road, again that blessed road less traveled. Tired, disheveled, wearing tennis shoes and no socks, we swiftly coursed along the treacherous, rainswept highway. It is amazing how colors of Red Rock Country seem to become so strongly enhanced under a gathering storm and reflected light. The sharp edge of a distant, shimmering rainbow drew our eye like a magnet...

The rainbow's sharpness, combination of light and dark, and illumination of the White Rim trail below drew us once again. Resting after the day's big climb, tennis shoes untied, socks off, suddenly it was time to rush across muddy ground, dangerous slick rock, and try to capture God's elusive rainbow.

First, safety demanded we stop and tie those perilous shoes...

Robert Frost rounds out our extraordinarily blessed day with,
*"I took the one less traveled by,
And that ~ ~ ~ has made **all** the difference."*



Majestic Blessing

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