

Apogee Photo Magazine

Joshua Tree National Park

by Michael Goldstein

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The beavertail cactus (*Opuntia basilaris*) looks like the prickly pear, but has much shorter spines. I liked the repetition of curves in this group shot, and used selective depth of field to have the new “tails” stand out sharply against the defocussed background.

of spreading branches recalled stories of the outstretched arms of the prophet Joshua, beckoning them onwards to the Promised Land. The Joshua tree, however, is neither tree nor cactus, but a member of the lily family. Its presence above altitudes of 2000 - 3000 feet in southern California marks the borders of the Mojave Desert.

The park and its surrounding desert areas make up the largest U.S. protected wilderness area outside of Alaska. A park this large enjoys a long list of attractions. The north side of the park, at a higher elevation, has entire forests of Joshua Trees in all their unpredictable shapes and sizes--some of them forty feet high, with a crown circumference exceeding thirty feet, and perhaps as old as a millennium. They began about when the Chinese city of Shanghai was founded, and Leif Ericsson landed on the coast of North America.

Joshua Tree National Park might be the weirdest place I've ever seen--something like a stage set out of a Star Wars movie: "... And may The Force be with you." To me, born and raised on the northeastern coast of North America, the Southwest has always looked like the back side of the moon. Instead of green forests, blue lakes, and the limitless Atlantic Ocean, the scenery is mostly bare rock and sand in all its variations, lava fields, great rents in Mother Earth, and dry deserts where my eye is always on my water bottle. Dry, but beautiful.

Who wouldn't gasp at the sight of morning light bouncing off the hoodoos of Bryce Canyon? Who wouldn't be humbled by the immensity of the Grand Canyon? Who wouldn't marvel at the effect of late-day sunshine on the Mittens in Monument Valley? Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico have sent me home with pads full of sketches, dozens of rolls of exposed film, and wonderful memories.

Joshua Tree National Park is not beautiful in the usual sense, but it can be said to be rendered beautiful by the very nature of its strangeness. Yet even its namesake is a misnomer.

The so-called Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*) was named by the Mormons in the 1850's, as they traveled through the Mojave Desert. The multitude



A real desert oasis, the Oasis of Mara, can be found just outside the town of Twentynine Palms. Complete with desert fan palms and a large spring, the oasis looks like it has been transplanted from the depths of the Sahara. However, like all southwestern parks, Joshua Tree's main attractions center largely on rocks. Here, the wonderful formations of monzogranite resemble scenes found in southern Utah. The park can even claim its own Arch Rock, a single arch that defies all who would find it. In fact, the many formations represent an irresistible challenge of another sort, a Mecca for rock climbers of all skill levels. The higher hills, that resemble piles of rubble, are Pinto Gneiss; there's even a large hill of basalt, a relic of a geological upheaval.

In the lower elevation of the Pinto Basin, you can find acres and acres of cholla cactus, the well-known "Teddy bear cactus" (*Opuntia bigelovii*). When backlit by the westering sun, these cacti appear fuzzy and cute--but don't try to hug them! They offer endless possibilities for photographic compositions, from wide-angle scenics to spring-time macros.

For those who enjoy hiking, the park offers a variety of short trails and longer ones, some up to sixteen miles long for a round trip. Old mines, abandoned ranches, and a wealth of geological attractions form destinations for these walks. A number of short nature trails display and explain many of the natural features of the park, as well. Several large campgrounds have been established in the more interesting and attractive areas of Joshua Tree, providing the usual amenities for car campers. Those at Jumbo Rocks and White Tank will have you sleeping right under many of the great rock formations you might wish to photograph (or climb!) in the early morning light.

Joshua Tree National Park plays host to a wide variety of wildlife, the most commonly seen of which might be the coyote and the greater roadrunner. Lucky (or diligent) observers might also find bighorn sheep, rattlesnakes, or a western grey fox. The cactus wren is a common sight.



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The cholla, or "teddy bear cactus" (*Opuntia bigelovii*) offers wonderful possibilities for macro photography, with its intricate construction. I used a 180mm macro lens for this image, a "closeup" lens that kept me far enough away from the spines.

Visitors from the East might find their first-ever cactus blossoms, if they arrive in mid-April--depending on the recent water history and spring temperatures. Those who like to drive, walk, and gawk will enjoy the fifty miles of well-paved roads that will leave even a family sedan undaunted. There are a host of other back roads, many of them challenging, for those with the clearance, multi-wheel drive, and an urge to "see it all". The nearest city to Joshua Tree (an easy hour's drive away) is Palm Springs, a delightful desert oasis of civilization in its own right and not just another airport gateway to a park experience.

The photographic experience in Joshua Tree is somewhat different from that in most

parks. While there are broad vistas to be photographed, they are not all that visually exciting, even in “magic hour” lighting. Low-angle light doesn’t seem to “make the world glow” here, as it does in other locations. The solution to the first problem is to concentrate on small compositions, rather than on the big picture--rock formations, compositions of individual Joshua Trees, cactus, and so forth. In spring, you’ll discover a host of subject material for macro photography while the desert wildflowers and cactus are in bloom. To counter the lighting problem, a blue-yellow polarizer can produce a wonderful glow on granite rock, giving the impression of late-day light. (In *The Story behind the Scenery* publication on Joshua Tree, you’ll find this technique has been used extensively.)

As in any desert park, you’ll want to come to Joshua Tree armed with extra camera batteries and suntan oil, an appreciation for a different kind of beauty, and lots of drinking water. Internet exploration can begin at <http://www.nps.gov/jotr>. You’ll find a wealth of information on the Web about the Park, much of it available for downloading and printing.

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