

Apogee Photo Magazine



Photographing Sunrise at Mesa Arch

by Clifford Kolber

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Sunrise at Mesa Arch

Sky plateau are spectacular and have been well photographed over the years.

One of those amazing views is from Mesa Arch at sunrise. The arch is located on the edge of a cliff about 2,000 feet above the Colorado River and overlooks mountains and buttes in the distance. When the underside of the arch lights up in reds and oranges as the sun rises, the cameras click!

Canyonlands National Park in Utah is an amazing display of red rock canyons sculpted by millions of years of erosion from the Colorado and the Green Rivers. The “Island in the Sky” region of Canyonlands is a huge plateau surrounded by the rivers. It is not really an island--the plateau is connected to the rest of the National Park by a small neck of land. Views overlooking the surrounding terrain from the Island in the

You'll want to arrive fairly early since there might be a crowd of photographers by sunrise. In addition, pre-dawn light can create some great images. We were staying in Moab so we left the hotel around 5:00 a.m. It's about an hour drive (including a coffee stop) to



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Washer Woman Butte, from Mesa Arch--35 minutes before sunrise.

the Mesa Arch parking lot and then an easy 1/2 mile walk to the arch. It was a cool morning in September, but the hike in warmed us up in no time. We were set up and ready to shoot before 6:30 a.m. With nature scheduling the sunrise at 7:00 a.m., we had plenty of time to scope the area and shoot with the early light. By sunrise there were almost a dozen photographers and space was becoming a premium.

Since this shot requires full sun and a clear sky, check before heading to the arch to be sure that it will not be cloudy. The fierce colors will not occur on a cloudy day. Your best bet would be to reschedule for another morning.



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Washer Woman Butte, from Mesa Arch--20 minutes before sunrise.

If you intend to include the sun in the image, remember that the sun is exactly opposite the arch around Mid-October. There are times of the year when the sun will not appear inside the arch. You can probably check with the National Park to find out.

Obviously a tripod is a requirement, and although I used a wide-angle 12-24 mm zoom lens with the sun rising, I also used a mid-range lens, 24-

120 mm lens for pre-dawn images, especially of "Washer Woman Butte" in the distance. To reduce flare when the sun will be included in your composition, use the widest lens you have and make sure no filters are on the lens.

For proper exposure once the sun breaks the horizon, I metered on the sky just above the arch. Normally to shoot the sun at sunrise I'll meter the sky about two or three sun globes away from the sun. But since there is so little space inside the arch, I chose to meter above it. It's always best to get the exposure right while shooting, even though you could adjust it later in Photoshop. So to be safe, I bracketed my shots, one stop each way. Be sure to check the histogram to verify the exposure.



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Mesa Arch--3 minutes after sunrise.

the absolute smallest aperture on your lens, since this can sometimes create aberrations on the image. I use the next to smallest aperture setting.

Be sure to experiment with a variety of apertures, speeds, lenses and angles. Once the sun breaks the horizon you'll have around four or five minutes of great light and that should give you enough time to shoot with different lenses and apertures and from different angles. Don't stay static--think about shooting from at least two different locations if space and time allows.



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Mesa Arch--10 minutes after sunrise.

To achieve a starburst effect around the sun, close the lens aperture down to around $f/18$ or $f/22$, a small opening. The small aperture allows light sources to become a starburst, so the smaller the aperture the more of the starburst effect will occur. Since a small aperture requires a longer exposure, you might want to use a cable release and mirror lockup in addition to your tripod for the highest stability. It's also a good idea *not to use*

I took time away from the camera to watch what was happening. The arch was ablaze with fire in its underbelly, while sun rays were shining across the landscape and through the arch. Mountains and buttes were lighting up in the distance. I wanted to watch for the rest of the time, but I had work to do. Back to the camera!

About 30 minutes after sunrise I had a camera full of images and the great show was over. So we packed up and headed back to the car with smiles on our faces. All in all, an incredible early morning at Mesa Arch with some great keepers for the portfolio.

Remember when visiting the outdoors--leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but pictures! And when you visit, remember to "pack it in and pack it out"--don't litter and don't damage anything. Leave the area as it was when you arrived and our natural lands will remain a memorable and rewarding experience for everyone.



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Mesa Arch--25 minutes after sunrise.

Cliff Kolber is a nature and travel photographer and writer based in Miami, Florida. He and his wife Doris have created a spectacular portfolio of images and articles from around the world, specializing in the Florida Everglades, the American Southwest and Antarctica.

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