

## *Plateaus and Canyons*

BRUCE BARNBAUM

*Plateaus and Canyons*

*Impressions  
of the  
American Southwest*

rockynook

*To the land I love so much  
On a planet that is so miraculous  
May we learn to love and protect it.*

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# Foreword



BRUCE BARNBAUM DOING COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY! And me discussing it! A couple of old black-and-white geezers dabbling in color? A conundrum for the ages, perhaps? Believe it or not, we are both color savvy. I, for one, am no fan of the “Kodak Moment” but I fervently love good painting—from Altamira to Abstract Expressionism. In his color work Brother Barnbaum demonstrably agrees, so we’re on the same wavelength. We have both photographed seriously in color, and Bruce’s color work is here for you to see.

Bruce and I met way back in 1979. We were both represented by the late Fifth Avenue Gallery of Photography in Scottsdale, Arizona. The director, Jim Robertson, got us together, and I ended up being Bruce’s assistant on a gallery-sponsored photo workshop. He didn’t fire me. In fact, beginning in 1981, he asked me to teach with him on the Arizona-Utah View Camera Workshop. After nineteen years we gave up on that venerable institution, as our wonderful canyon country field session locations were becoming progressively off-limits. I continue to co-teach photography workshops with Bruce. It’s consistently an honor to share that responsibility with the gentleman I consider to be absolutely the finest teacher of photography anywhere.

It’s Bruce’s abstract vision, both in color and black-and-white that really rocks my soul. But, I’m just your average unrepentant abstractionist. Bruce designs his photographs. *Waterholes Canyon Bas Relief* (page 197), my favorite, is symphonic in its composition. A non-musician, Bruce has a profound but discriminating love affair with classical music. It clearly influences the richness and complexity of his photography. His background in mathematics and physics is part of the deal, too. Other images that particularly reach out to me as fine abstractions are pages 87, 89, 175, and 193.

My mentor, Frederick Sommer, often compared the dynamics of a well-seen photograph to the experience of watching an exquisite dance performance. The dancer’s role is to threaten gravity. It’s the elegance of the recoveries from possibly becoming a pancake on the floor that are so compelling. *Nectarine Canyon* (page 171) exhibits visual threats and recoveries that I find most engaging. In a

more monumental way, *East Moody Canyon Wild Blue Wall* (page 93) equally misbehaves.

So often, color photography of the landscape is essentially an imitation of scenic painting; usually the light that is eminently controllable by the painter becomes abysmal in photography. To his credit, Bruce doesn't wax scenic very often. But, when he does, he makes the decision work. To wit, *Bryce Canyon National Park* (page 61) is magnificently rendered en plein air—a rare painterly photograph. Contrariwise, *Caineville Buttes and Fremont River Valley* (page 53) is not at all painterly—but could serve as an instructive object lesson to painters. *Painted Desert* (page 65) is ambiguous in the best sense of the word: simple/complex, cool/warm, serene/dynamic.

Major leaguer Barnbaum has wound up and delivered a couple of change-ups. *Deer Creek Gorge, Grand Canyon* (page 181): Egad! A square composition with the harmonics of a low brass choir. Beware *Miller Canyon: The Eyes of the Troll* (page 161)—the guy really has his mojo workin'.

My friend Bruce Barnbaum is a tireless advocate for the welfare of the natural scene. I concur, with little dissonance. While I prefer to experience a fine landscape from the back of a horse, sans camera, Bruce was born to ramble on foot, with 4×5 gear on his back and tripod at the ready. Long ago and similarly outfitted I abandoned the foolhardy notion of keeping up with him on a workshop “death march.” To Bruce a heavy pack is not a burden, merely an accessory to the sacrament of picture making. With such a minor inconvenience on board he vaults the deadly serpent, then steals its soul. Reaching *Buckskin Gulch View From the Center of the Earth* (page 143) was no casual drive-by.

These are fine photographs. Enjoy them.

Jay Dusard, Cochise County, Arizona, 2011

# Introduction



TWO PRIME OBJECTIVES WERE MY MOTIVATIONS for this book. The first is an overwhelming desire to express my impressions of the most unique and remarkable landscape of the United States, and likely of this planet: the canyon country of the Colorado Plateau, located in the southwestern United States. The U.S. has magnificent mountain landscapes, but the Himalayas, the Andes, and the Caucasus are bigger, higher. The U.S. has spectacular coastal regions, but they cannot be considered superior to those of many other lands around the world. Yet nothing compares to the variety and extent of the multi-layered lands found in the American Southwest.

Second is my desire to show these regions in color. I have been known almost exclusively for black-and-white photography, not only in the Southwest, but wherever I have turned my camera. After three previous monographs, this is my first book of color photography. Although I have made color photographs since I started in photography, until now I had no real outlet for the work.

My publisher, Rocky Nook, deserves credit for the creation of that outlet. My textbook, *The Art of Photography, an Approach to Personal Expression*, published in 2010, forced me to produce digital files, both in color and in black-and-white for the photographic illustrations that accompanied the text. That was a first for me; in all previous books I had supplied the printer with original prints made in my darkroom for reproduction purposes. With my new-found knowledge of scanning, and then finalizing the images through Lightroom and Photoshop, I was able to revisit years of color transparency shooting, surprising even myself with the extent of color photography I had produced. From the many I had scanned and worked to a finished digital file, I then separated images from the Colorado Plateau for this book, my first all-color book, with others in abeyance for the future.

I first visited the canyon country in 1975, on a trip to the Grand Canyon with a group of local Sierra Club friends. In 1976, I hiked the full 35-mile length of Paria Canyon and into the lower portion of its unreal tributary, Buckskin Gulch, with a national Sierra Club outing group, repeating that extraordinary hike in 1978. I backpacked into the Grand Canyon several times during those years. Starting with the

second Paria Canyon backpack, I began visiting the Colorado Plateau every year, sometimes several times each year, often spending as much as a month at a time there. It draws me in like a magnet. There is no place remotely like it, scenically, geologically or photographically. There is no other place that possesses the unusual light found within its myriad landforms.

Color says things that black-and-white cannot say, and vice versa. To my mind, these are two distinctly different art forms. I've found the need for both to fully express myself.

For this book I divided the imagery into three parts—plateaus, canyons, and slit canyons—though in fact, there is a slow morphing of one into another. While the differences between the first two parts are self-evident, what about the second and third? I'll loosely define a canyon as a deep cleft between two ridges (found commonly in mountain areas) or two plateaus (found more commonly in the Southwest), and wide enough to see the sky at all times. A slit canyon is often so narrow, with its walls often so convoluted that the sky is often blocked out. Light filters down from above, but in places you can't see the light source. In most slit canyons, the walls are so close together that you can touch both of them simultaneously. They are, indeed, quite different from canyons.

"Slit canyons." I created the term in 1980 when I discovered Antelope Canyon. I've used it ever since. I refuse to capitulate to the commonly used "slot canyon" (which came into being later) because the word "slot" conjures up images of Las Vegas, a place which I find wholly repulsive. I want nothing to do with that term. I'll ask you to live with it in my books. I'll even ask you to adopt it, yourself (with few apologies to those of you from Las Vegas).

Some images in the following pages can easily be placed into a different category, though each fits perfectly into the one into which it is placed. This is the problem with categorization: it creates sharp breaks where a smooth transition is more appropriate. For example, if I'm standing at the edge of a plateau gazing down into a canyon, which of the first two categories should the resulting image be placed? In the large scheme of things, it really doesn't matter.

# Part 1 – The Plateaus



THE WORD “PLATEAU” SEEMS TO IMPLY A LEVEL TRACT OF LAND, usually elevated. This could convey a misimpression of the Colorado Plateau. Little of that plateau is level. It is a large elevated region with a unique geological history of alternating submersions under seas, during which wide swaths of limestone were laid down, and periods of uplift above sea level, when vast tracts of sand dunes were laid down. While some of the details are still subject to scientific debate, one thing is certain: the chain of events unfolded over many millions—even billions—of years.

In fact, the Colorado Plateau is made up of multiple plateaus, all at different levels. Many are rolling, hilly tracts of land, and others are wildly convoluted or deeply chiseled. Many end in abrupt cliffs, rising vertically to a higher plateau or dropping downward to a lower one. Some involve eye-popping geological formations as the higher plateau erodes away at its edge, revealing its underlying bedrock in an astounding variety of forms. The nature of those forms is fully dependent on the type of bedrock. Bryce Canyon, the Painted Desert, and so many other areas are actually the eroded edges of a high plateau gradually disappearing into that of the next lower level.

So, if you’re expecting a plateau in this part of the world to be flat like Illinois, Iowa, or Kansas, or the central Outback of Australia, or the great steppes of central Asia, forget it. If you try walking a few miles in a straight line on these plateaus, you’d probably fall into a deep crevasse or find yourself huffing and puffing on the ups and downs along the way. This is a decidedly weird and complex plateau containing many plateau segments within it, each at a different level, and each unique.

Plateau edges tend to offer the most striking sights, but not always. Coyote Buttes, for example, is a magnificently warped, folded, convoluted, and colored swath of sandstone on a plateau directly above the granddaddy of all slit canyons, Buckskin Gulch. Placed in such close proximity to one another, these two marvels create one of the most astounding natural crescendos on earth.

This is desert and semi-desert country, so there aren’t many forests, except on the highest, cooler plateaus. The lower plateaus are too hot and dry to support forests. Yet some existed in the past, as evidenced by fields of petrified wood—remains of ancient trees, now mineralized and turned to stone—on currently desiccated land, where the record indicates a combination of a long-drying trend

and the possibility of deforestation by ancient inhabitants, which together may have been the causes of forest decline.

The Colorado Plateau, for the most part, is a stark land, where the geologic processes that molded it over the eons are right there in front of your eyes. For decades I have found this landscape to be as exceptional for its geological wonders as for its photographic opportunities. I revel in the unobstructed purity of the land. I love walking through it, feeling like a microbe crawling over the most elegant sculpture ever created, where the sculptor kept thinking up new and different ideas in every part of the piece. It's astoundingly inventive.

Some areas are intensely colorful; other are almost colorless. My intent is to neither enhance, intensify, nor subdue the coloration. My goal is to let the land speak for itself. I have tried to place the camera lens at a point in space that brought out the harmonies and rhythms of the land in the best manner possible. My intent has been to expose images under lighting and weather conditions that best conveyed the essence of the land. Ansel Adams lived for nearly 50 years in Yosemite Valley for a good portion of each year, yet he didn't photograph Yosemite Valley every day. He recognized that equal photographic opportunities did not exist every day. He photographed when conditions were exceptional. I have tried to follow Ansel's example. That does not imply seeking sharp or unusual lighting. Sometimes—and in some locations—a photograph should be made under soft, revealing light to avoid the harshness of intense sunlight and featureless shadows. At other times, in other locations, strong cross-lighting may be the most appropriate. As in all realms of photography, there are no rules.

ANDY MILLER FLATS, DAWN The Iliad and the Odyssey refer to “rosy-fingered Dawn” bringing on a new day. She was there when I was camping with my wife, dogs, and several friends for a few days in this area. Prior to climbing down to explore and photograph the slit canyon, we set out our chairs for breakfast. Seeing Dawn’s soft rosy light I jumped up to photograph it along with the thin sandstone walls that dominate the area.

Andy Miller Flats is saddled with a most misleading name. It’s hardly flat. You’d have to ignore the cliffs surrounding it, the tall sandstone fins guarding its entry, and the awesome cleft leading to a slit canyon in the center of it to call it flat. Even the road into it is bumpy.

I don’t know the geological history of the region, but it appears that those walls are the remains of an eroded arm of a plateau. Yet, viewed edge-on, they appear to be too thin to withstand the strong winds that buffet the area periodically.



**ANDY MILLER FLATS, DUSK, STORM** The day after the previous photograph was made, a very different set of weather conditions moved in. It appeared that bad weather was headed our way. The clouds were ominous, like ones I had previously encountered in mountain settings preceding a fearsome storm. Again we circled our chairs, this time before dinner, and talked about our second full day in the slit canyon and about the gathering clouds while sipping some good wine. Just as I did the previous morning, I jumped up to photograph the scene from nearly the same spot. This time, however, I was rushing to get it done before the onslaught hit us. This photograph conveys a completely different mood than the one made the previous morning. Although we were relaxing, we were also bracing for horrendous winds accompanied by driving rain or hail to hit at almost any moment, and to last throughout the night, based on what appeared to be brewing. Yet, as foreboding as it seemed, it was beautiful.

That night we were hit by a few gusts of wind. It rained a bit, but nothing of real consequence occurred. We were lucky. There are times when you wonder why you are foolish enough to be out in conditions like that. This wasn't one of those times.

