

7 Tips for Photographing Desert Landscapes

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1) Keep it simple.

Instead of looking to the horizon, try gazing at a single square yard. There, you're apt to see an amazing world of diversity that's easy to overlook. For example, granite graces much of the desert, but its tiny speckles of bright mica often don't get the attention they deserve. Likewise, the gorgeous cactus flower gets the glory, but what about the shapely and unique thorn?

2) Dramatic light rules.

The nature of the desert – survival in harsh environments – speaks to the drama of life here, but there's another sort of drama you can communicate. Try backlighting spiny cacti and thorny bushes. Play with the shadows created by boulders and stones. Glory in the cloud play and the brilliant blue of the sky. Sunrise and sunset bring on tones of red that accentuate the scenery. The sky opposite the sun often has a palette of pastel pinks and blues.

3) Layer it on.

Deserts really allow us to celebrate diverse layers – sand, soil, flora, mountain, sky. When you use your lens to represent those layers, try lots of ways of dividing the layers according to the rule of thirds. Often, we crave to put more sky in our desert shots because the sky really stands out, but what if you gave the foreground two-thirds of your attention? Look to the horizon with eye out for layers. How many options do you see? Once layers become apparent to you, play with the variety of ways you can present them through your lens using the rule of thirds. A telephoto lens helps to compress the layers.

4) Contrast color.

Deserts host more subtle colors than many other landscapes. Shades of tan, brown, and sienna need something to wake them up. Blue skies often make a nice contrast, but purplish cactus or variegated stones can add more of an emotional impact. Think in terms of the color wheel; analogous colors will be easy to find, but look harder to spot complementary ones that will truly wake up your image. But also beware of contrasting color in the scene that distracts—e.g. white quartz or sunny spots in the background that pull the eye from your real subject.

5) Capture motion.

Deserts often are mistakenly thought of as “dead” due to their lack of precipitation, but these former oceans teem with life! These are some of Earth’s most vivacious ecosystems. Think in terms of showing movement, change, and motion in your image. If wildlife is absent, let the wind show movement and motion – a swaying bush, a traveling cloud (*or the hint of such*). When creating photographs that communicate motion, pay attention to how the eye travels across the image.

6) Focus on the foreground.

Many times an ordinary object – e.g. rock, bush, or other object – can lend an extra-ordinary feel to your image when you put it first. Consider utilizing such objects to introduce the larger scene behind it.

7) Celebrate austerity.

Desert parts can be sparse, which makes focusing on the different shapes, textures, and subjects easier than in forested environments. Embrace this sparseness. Find a single flower in an expanse of bare dirt or gravel. Utilize the lack of competing shapes for engaging silhouettes. The best shots are usually simple. The desert works with us to accomplish this.

Award-winning naturalist photographer, Jeff Parker, leads friendly & informative photo tours & workshops designed for the naturally curious. Jeff journeys throughout North, Central, & South America.

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