Only an hour’s drive northeast of the lights and glitter of Las Vegas and the landscape framed in the viewfinder of my camera was as remote and desolate as any I’d ever photographed. The sun was dropping over the Muddy Mountains in the west. The February weather had been clear for a week. There were no clouds in the sky to catch the last colors of the day. The eastern sky was gray. The rock-strewn valley reaching into the distance was blazing with many shades of red.

I started this sunset session with a 17mm lens on the camera but found that the dramatic mountain range to the north was reduced to insignificance. After trying several longer focal lengths, I decided that my 300mm was the right lens for this dramatic landscape.

Many fascinating desert landscapes are here, including petrified trees and petrified sand dunes. Wildlife photographers will find spiders, snakes, and lizards, including the rare gila monster. Coyotes and the desert tortoise are easy to spot.

Explore the remote wilderness across the northern reaches of the park. Drive the rough unpaved byways around the south end of the park and discover mountains of red sandstone that have eroded into fantastic patterns of multi-colored layers, tilted and twisted into swooping curves.

During your next photography exploration of the Southwest, schedule time to discover the Valley of Fire State Park and Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area.
The Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada’s first state park, is located fifty-five miles northeast of Las Vegas. The road to the park leaves Highway 15 at exit 75, and is a half-hour drive northeast of Las Vegas at the Moapa Indian Reservation Tribal Store. I punched the reset button on my trip odometer as I left Las Vegas, merging onto Interstate 15 heading northeast toward Arizona. When I left the freeway at exit 75 into the western entrance of the park, the trip odometer read 31 miles. I stopped there at the Moapa Indian Store. The large sign over the door said “Moapa Tribal Enterprises.” Below that it read “Slots, Video Poker, Fireworks, and Crafts.” I got a bag of ice for the groceries in my cooler chest and a large bottle of water.

The road to the park, Route 169, heads east across a flat, ten-mile, sage-covered plain. In the distance, sharp peaks rise from the desert floor. The road twists, turns, and climbs a thousand feet to a sign at the official entrance to the Valley of Fire State Park. Morning light was backlighting the red formations framed in the v-shaped opening into the valley. Lake Mead was visible in the distance—a great color contrast.

Near the bottom of the hill, there is a pay-station where visitors stop to deposit the park entry fee in an envelope and then push it into a slot in the metal box. If you don’t have the exact change, you can pay the fee at the Visitor Center, another four miles farther down the road.

Fill your gas tank before leaving Las Vegas. Gasoline is available at Logandale and Overton.
A mile beyond the pay-station, is an area called the “Beehives.” The morning light across these formations was sharp and clear. It brought out the red-orange colors of the Aztec sandstone. I hiked around the area, shooting the layered domes from several directions. The sky was clear and featureless. I set up my tripod on the higher spots, looking downward and cropping out all the sky in some compositions. The jumbled mounds of rocks did not give me a straight and level horizon so I didn’t use a graduated gray filter on the sky.

These rounded domes of sandstone were formed 600 million years ago, in layers of silt and sand on the bottom of a sea that once covered this area. Many centuries of discarded shells and layer upon layer of marine creatures settled as limestone to create carbonate sediments that were several miles thick over southern Nevada. During this period of time, called the Paleozoic era, changes in the water level, changes in temperature or chemistry, or occasional retreats by the seas created distinct layers of stone.

Changes in the Earth’s surface lifted this part of the North American continent 200 million years ago, and the sea floor slowly rose. The ancient sea bottom lifted and was exposed to become a desert of dried and eroded mud. Rivers flowing across this desert from distant mountains carried sand and gravel that scoured and exposed ancient layers of marine sediments to the air. Strong desert winds carried dried sand that carved the soft layers into fantastic patterns. Those winds slowly buried this limestone desert beneath thousands of feet of sand dunes—dunes that became compacted, then cemented together, and then fossilized into solid layers of swirled sandstone. Iron in the layers of sand and mud oxidized and created the many colors of red, purple, and pink, plus the tan and white formations visible today. Shifting global weather patterns are evident in the various directions of wind-blown sand across some formations. These cross-hatched patterns are vividly seen in the formations near the west entrance.

One of the first things visitors to the Valley of Fire will notice is the incredible number of holes in the rocks. In places, the formations look like Swiss cheese—the same color and the same deep pits. These were the places in the sandstone that the wind and the water found most vulnerable. Early morning and late afternoon light brings out the strong patterns of these formations. Arrive too late in the afternoon and the sun will have dropped below the rim of the Muddy Mountains in the west.

Back on the paved park road, a half-mile beyond the Beehives, are several fallen petrified logs. There are two short loop trails that start at the parking area. The half-dozen trees are surrounded by low chain link fences. These trees are a type of primitive pine that grew in a wet and warm tropical forest when this area, now southern Nevada, was once located much further south, near the equator. Fallen trees that were buried by mud were slowly petrified by quartz and other minerals replacing the cellulose structure of the wood. Several more of these trees are visible in other parts of the Valley of Fire today. Blowing sand, footprints, and souvenir hunters have damaged these logs.

As you leave the parking area at the trailhead to the petrified logs, drive directly across the main park road and continue north on the road to Atlatl Rock. At the end of the short trail beyond the parking lot, there are 83 metal steps leading up to a metal platform in front of a large panel of petroglyphs that are a hundred feet above ground level on the eastward-facing wall of a large red outcropping called the Atlatl Rock. There are several examples of the throwing sticks called “atlatls” chipped into the dark desert varnish covering the vertical red sandstone wall. These throwing sticks were used before there were bows and arrows. The added leverage of the notched wooden stick gave extra power and accuracy to a hunter’s thrown spear.

Out on the low southwest deserts, summer temperatures can reach over 120° F. Rainfall averages less than four inches a year and falls as light winter snowers or during heavy summer thunderstorms.

Spring and Autumn are the best times to visit the Valley of Fire. The weather was perfect during my February visit, but heavy rains in January closed some roads in the area. Remember that the sun rises and sets early out here on the eastern edge of the Pacific time zone.
There are two campgrounds located near the west side of the park. Both are accessible from the Atlatl Rock Loop Road. Campsites have shaded picnic tables, grills, water, and restrooms. A fee is charged and is payable at the entrance to each campground.

There are many animals across the panel that look like desert bighorn sheep. Human forms are standing below their weapons with upstretched arms. There are spirals and circles that may represent water flowing from springs and symbols that look like falling rain. There are strange strings of small circles and larger circles that look like wagon wheels. Most archaeologists agree that humans were in this area 4,000 years ago when the climate was wetter and cooler than it is now. Some think that the earliest weapon-users that lived in this area arrived about 3,000 years ago. Others believe that the art is the work of the Anasazi, who departed this area around 1150 A.D. The petroglyphs may represent the work of all the early inhabitants of the Valley of Fire.

I’ve photographed petroglyphs in most of the western states and I’m always amazed at the similarity of the simple styles that depict the forms of humans and animals. The running bighorn sheep on Atlatl Rock look almost exactly like the bighorns chipped into stones a thousand miles away in northeast Utah. Very similar images of Kokopelli, the flute player, can also be found on distant canyon walls around the Southwest. The fanciful creatures in spirit images on petroglyph panels and the elaborately costumed Anasazi priests are an exception and seem to vary widely across the Southwest.

I followed one of the trails that led beyond Atlatl Rock and found a campground that looked like a great place to stay. I decided to spend a few nights in the park. I hiked back to my car in the Atlatl Rock parking area and continued driving around the rock formations to the campground. Near the entrance to the campground was a large flat slab of rock balanced on stone legs like a grand piano. In the campground, I found a great campsite in the shade of a huge red monolith, paid my fee at the entrance, and returned to spread out my gear and eat lunch. I opened some topo maps of the park and planned my days in the Valley of Fire.

I needed more information about the park trails and wanted to ask questions of the rangers about the most scenic locations in the park for photography. I packed up, taped a hand-lettered “CAMPSITE OCCUPIED” sign to the table, and headed to the Visitor Center, a couple of miles to the east.

The Visitor Center Road

The main, paved road through the Valley of Fire runs east to west, across the southern section of the park. About half-way through the park, a side road heads north, up into the center of the park, to an area called White Domes. This road was built in 1965 and led to a Mexican hacienda built in the White Domes area for a movie called “The Professionals,” starring Lee Marvin. My maps showed some trails that I’d never hiked before. I remembered some great landscapes, that I’d seen on previous trips, that I wanted to photograph beyond that great viewpoint on the top of the hill.
After making the turn onto the side road, I spotted the Visitor Center sitting up in the rocks at the base of red stone cliffs. I parked out front and started into the building when I spotted their cactus garden near the front door. I returned to my car for a camera and made some close-ups of the prickly pear near the door. There are some very interesting exhibits in the Visitor Center covering the geology, the wildlife, and the flora of the park. They sell four highly-detailed topographical maps that cover most of the of the area. Their shop has some postcards and a few books on general desert topics.

Back on the road, I continued north into the heart of the park to find some of the places I learned about in the Visitor Center—places where I might find some interesting photography. A sign points out that the road is closed from dawn to dusk. Photographers must find their sunrise and sunset locations elsewhere. The road beyond the Visitor Center climbs a steep hill through a jumble of eroded red sandstone formations. The holes are where softer pockets of sandstone have been removed by wind and water. There are no places to stop along the narrow paved road until you drive a mile north, to a sign that marks the entrance to the parking area at the trail to Mouse's Tank. I parked there and walked back up the road to photograph small arches I spotted along the road.

Mouse's Tank is the hiding place of a renegade Paiute Indian named Mouse, who escaped the law of the 1890s by hiding out in the most remote and rugged part of the Valley of Fire. He survived in this desert when he found drinking water in the “tank,” a natural basin in the jumble of rocks that collects rainwater. He was cornered by a posse and shot here in July of 1897. From the parking area, it’s a half-mile down Petroglyph Canyon to the tank.

At the trailhead, a sign shows some of the rock art to be found along the trail and their interpretations. I found all of the examples on the sign with a half-hour of searching the canyon walls. I especially liked the group of four human forms doing the “snake dance.” Several strange rock formations were interesting, including the tilting, top-heavy spire pictured here to the right.

Rainbow Vista is the first opening in the rocks along this road with a view toward the north. A view of a landscape that falls away toward the deep washes that scour the valley and drain eastward into the Muddy River—now the Overton Arm of Lake Mead. Late afternoon light best illuminates the fantastic shapes and many colors exposed by erosion. I found that the park road bisects the best composition and can’t be avoided in wide-angle views of the scene. My favorite spot to photograph this area is several miles further down the road.

A few hundred feet beyond the parking area marked “Rainbow Vista” is a side road to the right that leads to a parking area less than a mile away marked Silica Dome and Fire Canyon Viewpoint. I drove out to the parking area, stopped, and walked around the locked gate just beyond the viewpoint. My map showed that the road continues another four miles and eventually reaches the pavement on the North Shore Road. I had walked only a short distance before spotting some small white silica domes beside the road. The sides of the formations were webbed with thin fins of hard layers of stone that were once deposited on the bottom of an ancient sea. Those once-flat layers have been tilted up and are now, a few million years later, vertical.
The softer sands between the thin hard layers have eroded away and have left jagged spines spaced about a foot apart. Some of these fins reach up as high as my knee and can be seen crossing the desert floor, into the distance. Those are some amazing “leading lines” for desert landscape photos.

The gate across the road near the Silica Dome/Fire Canyon Viewpoint may be there to keep visitors from finding and damaging the delicate sandstone formations. Since the road leads out of the park, it may be locked because it crosses private property. In the distance, I saw the town of Overton, Nevada, on the south side of the Muddy River.

Back on the pavement near Rainbow Vista, the road continues north. It dips and climbs, up and down, through many deep washes. Asphalt pavement is replaced with solid concrete at the bottoms of the dips. There are no bridges and no culverts to wash out. When flash floods roll down these canyons, the road is closed. The last cars out must ford the streams. The road is narrow and parking is not permitted except for a few designated high spots. By parking in those spots, I was able to walk the length of the road beyond Rainbow Vista several times during my week in the Valley of Fire. I found many small arches and some great cross-hatched patterns to photograph.

Watch for the third parking area beyond the Rainbow Vista. Park on the left side of the road, walk across the pavement, and follow the footprints that lead out to a low sandstone dome a few hundred feet north. From up there, you’ll see my favorite vista of the Valley of Fire. Arrive in late afternoon before the sun starts to drop over the mountains in the west. Set up your tripod on the dome and use a polarizing filter on any lens from 85mm to 300mm to reduce any haze and capture the sharp contrast of red sandstone against the distant blue sky. Swirling patterns across the sandstone dome in the foreground make strong patterns of lines that can be arranged to lead across your compositions toward the horizon. The light was fading as I folded my tripod to leave.

If you wait for the sunset in this spot, the sun will drop over the Muddy Mountains in the west and you will have no light to illuminate the jumble of red stones in the distance. If you stay and shoot until the last light is gone and the rangers tell you to leave and close the road, you will have a long drive back to Las Vegas in the dark. Return to Las Vegas via the park’s west entrance and Interstate 15. Don’t leave the east entrance of the park after dark and return to Las Vegas via the North Shore Road. If you miss the turn onto Lake Mead Boulevard, you might end up at Hoover Dam. Hopefully, you will be camping in the park and will have already selected your campsite. The campsites usually fill on a first-come basis by mid-morning. You don’t want to be looking for a campground in the dark.

Back on the visitor road driving north beyond the Rainbow View, a side road leads to the right. My map shows that the road leads out to a formation called “Duck Rock.” The road is closed with a locked gate. A “No Parking” sign on the gate probably means that you should drive to the parking area at the end of the road and walk back. Walking back to the gate from my car in the White Domes...
parking area, I made some detours down into the deep wash along the road to photograph more thin fins of red sandstone. Several of the dry wash bottoms I explored had walls covered with these delicate formations.

I walked down one dry wash photographing those thin red fins along the canyon wall, then returned up the other side shooting several miniature arches. When I reached the gate, I stepped over the barrier and walked about three-quarters of a mile north to the end of the road. The free map passed out at the Visitor Center says that Duck Rock is in this location but there are no signs out there at the old parking area. The road was probably closed when flash floods washed out the trail to Duck Rock.

From the end of the road, bear to the right and find the easiest route down into the bottom of the wash below. Turn right—downstream—and walk the dry sandy bottom for several hundred yards until you reach a large corrugated metal culvert pipe that was washed down here. Just beyond this point, look up and to the right and you’ll see the duck’s head, a balanced stone formation that is visible only from this angle.

Climb up closer and try a wide-angle lens to include the stones beneath the formation. Walk another hundred yards downstream and you’ll find some beautiful red and white stripes across a multi-layered stone outcropping that has been exposed and eroded by the stream. That spot kept me busy for over an hour. Farther downstream, I found coyote tracks in dried mud surrounding three pools of standing water in a deeper section of the canyon. It was difficult to continue northward around these pools, so I headed back.

On my map of the park, there are no roads across the area to the north of Duck Rock marked “wilderness.” On my map there is a small rectangular annex marked VFSP a short distance from the west side of this state park.

Late in the afternoon, I returned to my car in the White Domes parking lot at the end of the road, and headed out in the other direction. I followed the most obvious trail through the White Dome area and headed through the opening between the largest rocks. The trail leads into an area of purple stone formations. Walking out to the edge of the purple cliffs, I saw the remains of the movie set used in the production of the 1996 film “The Professionals” down below.

I walked back to my car and then followed the other trail—a trail that climbs up and over the white domes. I climbed up to an even better view of the area and then descended to the other side of the dome into a dry wash full of barrel cactus, more interesting rock formations, and purple canyon walls. The trail made a loop around the domes past the old movie set and back to the parking area.

The light was getting good, so I headed back to my favorite viewpoint near the third parking lot for a different angle of that panoramic view. I found a spot beside the rock and tried a different composition using a 300mm lens. A polarizer cut through the slight amount of blue haze across the distant mountains.

The night was quiet out there in the rocks. The loudest sounds were the coyotes singing to each other. I stayed four nights in the campground while I explored and photographed the park. I avoided the fifty-mile-drive back to Las Vegas and the expense of motels. I enjoyed the peace and quiet of night on the desert.

What I remember most about my trips to the Valley of Fire State Park are the fantastic shapes of the eroded sandstone formations, the deeply-pitted cliff walls, and the “Swiss cheese” appearance of the landscape. There are balancing rocks, piano-shaped rocks, duck heads, elephant-shaped rocks, as well as arches and beehives.

This trip I wanted to photograph the desert landscapes over the distant mountains, beyond the end of the road. I wanted to find and
photograph the desert wildlife. I filled the rest of my week in the park exploring all the trails and walking all the sandy canyon bottoms I could find.

This is not a large park. There are only a few dozen miles of paved roads to drive. Each day I hiked farther from the pavement. Instead of discovering great vistas, I was enjoying the smaller details out there on the desert. I photographed several types of lizards, although I never found a gila monster. I didn't see a single snake but I spotted several large desert tortoises. It was too early in the year for wildflowers or cactus blossoms. I found many small fishhook cactus, the mammillaria microcarpa, and some large barrel cacti on the hot, south-facing slopes of the hills. The canyon wrens, hawks, vultures, and ravens were always busy. The coyotes came out only at night.

I searched my maps for trails and roads to explore outside the boundaries of the park. Across the bottom of my map, I found a dotted line, just south of the park. It crosses BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land from Highway 15 to the North Shore Road. My last day in the Valley of Fire was filled with an exploration of this unpaved byway.

BITTER SPRING ROAD
Three miles east of the Moapa Tribal Store, the road to the Valley of Fire makes a forty-five degree bend to the left. An unmarked gravel road continues straight ahead. This road is marked on some maps as the Bitter Spring Trail Back Country Byway. The USGS “Lake Mead” 30x60 minute topo map shows the entire length of this road. A short distance down that road, a sign points out that you are entering BLM land and you’ll proceed at your own risk. Several miles further along the road, another sign points out that it is twenty miles to the North Shore Road. That’s the paved road on the east side of the Valley of Fire.

The unpaved track climbs a low pass over the Muddy Mountains. As it climbs into the hills, the road passes through a landscape of fractured and jumbled sandstone. Morning light across the formations brought out the brilliant colors of the stone. This location looks like an even better spot for a sunset photo session. The mountains to the east are much higher than the mountains to the west and block the first rays of the morning. These beehive-shaped formations are called the “Buffington Pockets” on the USGS Lake Mead topo map.

Further up the hill, I stopped several times and climbed out across the tops of the sandstone formations. At one point, a side road makes a circular loop that skirts the base of a huge outcropping of cross-grained sandstone. The formation looks like beehives that have been tilted up at a 45-degree angle. I parked off the road and walked up the sandy hill, around the west side of the rocks, and climbed up onto the back side of the formation. The outcappings are a fantasy of curves and swooping lines. The formations are many shades
of ochre and honey with narrow bands of white sandstone. There were a half-dozen varieties of cactus growing in the soft desert soil on the hill above the formation.

Another two miles up the road is a working gravel quarry. One of my maps calls it the “Colorock Quarry.” The road goes through the middle of the quarry and continues climbing. The road quickly narrows and becomes much rougher. Another mile further up the rough and rocky track, the road dips down a very steep and slippery slope. I shifted the transfer case into low range and slowly eased down the sliding, rocky surface.

Any two-wheel drive vehicle can make it as far as the quarry with no problems. Beyond that point, a high-clearance vehicle, like a 4x4, an off-road vehicle, or even a pickup truck, is advisable. Driving the entire road, all the way through the twenty-eight miles to the pavement of the North Shore Road is definitely easier with four-wheel drive. Allow at least three hours to drive the entire length of the road. You’ll need at least a half day if you want to do some exploring and make a few stops for photography. I’d call it an all-day trip.

The road drops downhill and heads east along the slopes on the south side of the Muddy Mountains. This large plain slopes toward the river and is called the White Basin. Beyond the plain to the east are the vertical walls of Longwell Ridge. White Basin is dotted with thousands of barrel cacti. Most are less than three-feet tall. These red-topped barrels are covered with long, fish-hooked spines. Their yellow/green flowers bloom from late March through June.

I put on my new pair of rattlesnake-proof gaiters and walked out through the cactus looking for desert tortoise. I found a fairly large tortoise but no snakes. I’ve seen more snakes in the Lake Powell area than in the Mojave, but the deadly Mojave green rattler has the most potent venom of all the rattlesnakes.

The last five miles of this “road” drops down into a deep, sandy wash and follows a stream bed. For several miles, I drove down a dry canyon bottom with no view to either side. In at least a dozen places, the unmarked track forked off to follow side canyons. I followed the route with the most tire marks. In some places,

I just kept heading east. When the tire tracks in the sand forked at the vertical wall called West Longwell Ridge, I made a guess and took a right turn following the dry stream bottom between narrow canyon walls. The landscape opened again at the Bitter Spring Valley. The road stayed down in the bottom of the dry wash.

When I reached Bitter Spring, the scene changed again. The canyon bottom was flowing with a shallow stream of water. The spring may dry up later in the summer but, in February, there was an oasis of tamarisk, cottonwood, and willows. I saw several hawks flying over the small swampy area. This spot is less than five miles west of the paved North Shore Road near Lake Mead.

There was no soft or fine sand to negotiate along the Bitter Spring Byway, just fine gravel at the worst places. When I reached the flowing stream from Bitter Spring, I stopped and let five pounds of air out of each tire for better traction. I didn’t want to get stuck out there. During my all-day exploration of those twenty-eight miles to the pavement of the North Shore Road, I saw no other vehicles and not another person along the route.

I left the unpaved Bitter Spring Byway where it crosses under the highway bridge beneath the paved North Shore Road. The unpaved byway continues down Echo Wash another two miles to the edge of the Echo Bay Marina on Lake Mead. The faster, paved road to the marina leaves the North Shore Road about two miles north of the Bitter Spring/North Shore intersection.
Echo Bay Marina has a gas station and a restaurant. There is a motel overlooking the marina and a rental office where you can sign up for a week on a houseboat or rent a fast powerboat for a day. There are several campgrounds in the area and an RV Park. This is one of the closer places to find gas, food, and lodging in the Valley of Fire area. The eastern entrance to the Valley of Fire State Park is located ten miles north of the Echo Bay Marina Road.

Another location for services, even closer to the Valley of Fire, is the town of Overton, Nevada. A few miles north of the park’s east entrance on Highway 169, Overton has several small motels, a restaurant, and gas stations. It is also the location of the Lost City State Museum. A “must-see” for visitors interested in learning more about the early inhabitants of this region.

After filling my gas tank in Overton, I returned to Las Vegas via the North Shore Road. It’s more scenic than Interstate 15. When I reached Route 147, Lake Powell Blvd., I turned toward North Las Vegas and drove up through the Sunrise Mountain Natural Area around the north side of Frenchman Mountain. The road climbs up and through a V-shaped pass. It was dark when I reached the top. At the summit, all the lights of Las Vegas spread out below. I pulled over, set up the tripod, and finished my day’s photography.

**RED ROCK CANYON**

I had made motel reservations for my last two nights in Las Vegas. I had a whole day to explore before heading home, but I wanted to get out of the city. The desk clerk at the motel recommended that I take the loop road about twenty-miles west of Las Vegas through the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. I had never been there. This turned out to be a great suggestion.

I left Las Vegas, heading west on Charleston Blvd., crossing under Interstate 15. As I drove west I could see, in the distance, thousand-foot vertical walls called the Wilson Cliffs reaching straight up to the ragged eastern escarpment of the Spring Mountains. The morning sun was striking the red cliffs head on. Patches of snow covered the highest peaks. It looked like another great day for photography.

Twenty miles west of Las Vegas, a marked side road on the right leads north to the new Red Rock NCA Visitor Center. Starting at the Visitor Center, a thirteen-mile, one-way scenic loop road climbs to an elevation of five-thousand feet for a spectacular panoramic view of the Wilson Cliffs. I parked up there and waited, hoping for the clouds to part and let the morning sun light up the mountains again.

The long straight line of the Wilson Cliffs receded into dark distant clouds. Clouds were rolling in from the west. It looked like rain or maybe some snow was coming. It got colder and started to rain. The distant peaks disappeared and I packed the camera away.

Continuing around the one-way loop, I took the side road into Willow Springs Canyon. There were pictographs of Indian hands on the canyon walls and some great patches of
bright red prickly pear cactus. A very cold wind started blowing down the canyon. It looked like snow was about to fall.

I pulled off the road when I saw the unusual (for the desert) ponderosa pine forest leading into Pine Creek Canyon. My map showed trails leading into Oak Creek Canyon, First Creek Canyon, Spring Mountain Ranch State Park, and Bonnie Springs. Those canyon hikes could fill several days of a future trip into this area.

I wanted a photograph of the Wilson Cliffs. I passed the small community of Blue Diamond then turned right on Highway 160 and headed west, up the Cottonwood Valley, toward Death Valley. I drove two miles west before I found an unpaved side road leading off through a grove of yuccas and Joshua trees. I found the foreground I wanted for my photograph and parked.

While waiting for a rain storm to blow over, I opened my cameras and blew out the accumulated dust and dirt from my week in the Valley of Fire. Winter rains are usually light and of short duration. The heavy rains (up to four inches an hour) of July and August can fill narrow canyons with dangerous flash floods.

When I looked up again, blue sky was peeking over the Toiyabe National Forest. I jumped out, set up the tripod and camera, took a meter reading and watched the clouds move in, covering the sun again. Yuccas in front of my car stood out strongly against the dark background for just a moment as the sun illuminated the foreground.

I plan to return to Red Rock Canyon in May so I marked my new copy of the Nevada Atlas and Gazetteer by DeLorme with the locations in red marking pen. DeLorme has released an Atlas & Gazetteer covering the state of Nevada.

YOUR VISIT TO THE DESERTS OF THE SOUTHWEST
Photographers visiting the Southwest might want to consider starting their trips in Las Vegas. You can pick up a rental car, drive past the casinos, and head right out of town. It’s less than a three-hour drive from Las Vegas to Zion National Park. After a few days of photographing Zion, head north to Bryce Canyon National Park. Then continue eastward through Escalante to Capitol Reef National Park, to Natural Bridges National Monument. Spend an extra week photographing Canyonlands and Arches National Park or head south through Monument Valley, Canyon de Chelly, and into Page, Arizona. The best of the slot canyons are in the Page area. Zion is only two hours drive west of Page, Arizona.

While you’re waiting for your flight out of Las Vegas, visit the Ethel M Chocolate Factory and Cactus Gardens on East Sunset Road. East Sunset runs east and west on the south side of McCarran International Airport. Follow the road as it curves to the left into the Green Valley Business Park and turn left into the parking area at the sign. Take the free tour and you’ll receive a free sample of their chocolate. Their multi-acre cactus gardens have over three-hundred-fifty species. By mid-spring, many varieties are in bloom. These fascinating gardens are worth a long visit by all photographers interested in macro work.

Have a great trip and send me a post card!
My life-long career in photography began at San Jose State University in 1957. After college, I enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, serving as a photographer and darkroom technician. In Germany, my skills and experience with equipment and lab work were developed and polished. I took the opportunity to photograph the beauty of nature in the Black Forest. Returning to California in 1965, I produced industrial and military training films for Raytheon Electronics and began showing my color nature prints. From 1969 through 1981, my photography was exhibited and sold in West Coast galleries. During the early 1980’s, I taught color darkroom workshops, then expanded to include field trips. Former customers, who had purchased my framed photographs, wanted to learn photography. My Pacific Image Photography Workshops offered adventures to the Pacific Coast, the Southwest deserts, national parks, Hawaii, New England, Canada, England, and the South Pacific. The workshops evolved into writing and sharing my adventures with others. Photograph America Newsletter provides information on where, when, and how to discover the best nature photography in North America.

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