

HORIZON NEWS #63

IMAGES, THOUGHTS AND NEWS FROM HORIZON PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS

“If you want to be a better photographer, stand in front of more interesting stuff.”

Jim Richardson

Eureka: We “Discovered” Eureka!

If you love landscape photography and are searching for what photographer Jim Richardson would undoubtedly call “interesting stuff,” you can’t do better than sand dunes. When the sun or moon is relatively low on the horizon, dunes virtually explode with elegant and distinctive shapes and patterns. What makes dune photography a particularly uncommon treat is we rarely have the opportunity to photograph dunes since most are located in remote places.

I have tramped upon at least eight different dunes in the United States. I’ve never met one I didn’t like. However, dunes are not all created visually equal. What makes one “photographically superior” to another? If you could choose which dune to photograph, where should you go? I’m no dune expert, but here are the factors that, for me, separate the fabulous from the merely wonderful.

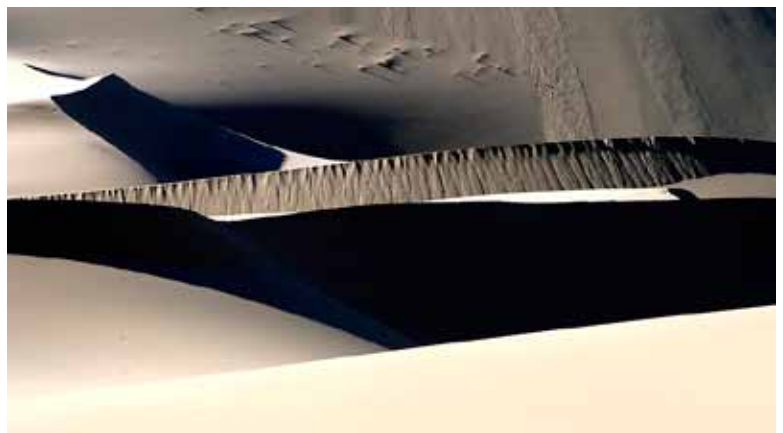
1. **Undulation & Elevation.** For those distinctive light and shadow patterns, you want lots of curves and nooks and crannies. Some dunes have more than others. My (unscientific) observation is that taller dunes have more undulation than lower ones. Also, tall dunes seem to possess more significant “shearing effects,” sand builds up in height until there is a “mini-avalanche,” creating a distinctive, dramatic pattern.

2. **Wind.** Wind is the force that lifts sand up from one place and drops it where the dune forms, so no wind, no dune. Wind, which is a consequence of weather and season as well as dune location, creates lovely, if familiar, patterns in the sand. Wind also serves to “airbrush” away unwanted footprints and animal tracks. *Yay for wind!* But—and this is a big but—wind can blow sand into your camera bag or, much worse, into the inner-workings of your camera, which can be, at the least, nagging legacies of a dune visit. Wind is a blessing...and a curse.

3. **Accessibility & Popularity.** Readily accessible dunes and/or ones that are major tourist destinations translate into footprints...the bane of the dune photographer. I once walked over an hour in Death Valley’s popular Mesquite Flat Sand Dunes just to find an area that wasn’t totally dominated by prints...and that was in the off-season! Another aspect of accessibility to consider: how much hiking is needed to get to the dune. For the Kelso Dunes in the Mojave Desert, for



Bill Daniel gets a classic view. This is how Eureka looks about one hour after sunrise (when the sun come up over a nearby mountain).



Ray Hull moves in closer, adds contrast, reduces color.



For a smoother ride, we drove on the berm beside the road. **Sherm Levine**

example, it's an intense half-hour walk from the parking lot just to get to the base of the dune...then it's an hour more just to get beyond most of the footprints.

4. **Off-road vehicles.** Unless your objective is photographing ATVs or ATV tracks, choose a dune that doesn't allow them.

5. **Vegetation.** Dunes generally have plants that miraculously cling to life in these generally forbidding environments. The plants at some dunes have a look that can enhance photos; others have scrubby stuff you'd probably try to minimize or eliminate from your compositions...but that's not always possible.

6. **Background.** Many dune photos have just sky in the background but, ideally, one would like to have other background options that can add atmosphere. The backdrop rock formations at Monument Valley's dune, for example, are unique and stunning...but so popular as to have become a visual cliché.

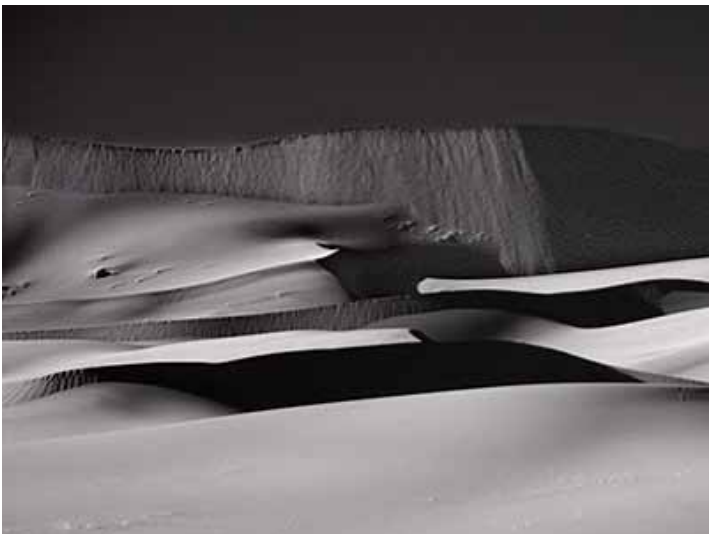
Taking all these factors into account, my vote for the best American dune is, hands-down, Eureka Dunes.

Located in the remote northernmost corner of Death Valley National Park in eastern California, it is way off the beaten track—25 miles from the nearest highway at the end of a long dirt road that tests your shock absorbers' effectiveness. When I brought my workshop group there this June, we were the ONLY visitors, so any footprints were ours. At 700 feet, these dunes are among the tallest in North America, with nooks and crannies galore. Plants are minimal and not unappealing. The dunes are surrounded on almost three sides by an arc of mountains which have the feel of a lunar landscape.

Judge Eureka from these photos taken an hour or two after sunrise by my workshop students and me.

NOTE: I'm planning to reprise this year's **Eastern Sierras & Yosemite** trip, including a return to Eureka, in late-May of 2015. I'll also do a workshop to the **Great Parks of Utah** in late April, 2015. Stay tuned for details.

Steve Gottlieb



Left: **Mark Houlday** used infrared to produce a dramatic, high contrast look. Right: **Steve Gottlieb** focused on the sheared, textured quality seen in many of the dune's facades; these are common at Eureka (they are also visible in Houlday's and Hull's shots (above and prior page). Note how quickly the dune rises in elevation from the ground level (about 3,000 ft. above sea level).



Sherm Levine catches Gottlieb racing down the dune (left). Eureka is so steep in some places you can body surf on it. **Gottlieb** zeroes in on a few inches of fresh bug trail (right); with no frame of reference, this could just as well be heavy equipment tracks. Observe how here, as in most dune shots, the shadows are the key to the picture.



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OUT WITH THE 35, IN WITH THE 4/3

Over the course of a thirty-year career, I have used SLRs, 2 1/4 cameras, view cameras, and panoramic cameras. Yet in sixty-three issues of **Horizonews** I have never written an article evaluating equipment. Why? With so many knowledgeable people writing thoughtfully and thoroughly about equipment, I generally feel I don't have much important to add. Also, while there are meaningful differences between different brands as well as different camera models, the equipment experts—and those who follow them—tend to get way down into the weeds which, to my mind (and switching metaphors), can sometimes make mountains out of molehills. Finally, and by far most important, what I care about is not the particular camera I use—the good ones all do the job they're designed for—but being intimately familiar with whatever camera I happen to be using. The less mental energy I expend thinking about equipment, the more is available to concentrate on making good pictures.

For the first time in over a decade, I decided to switch systems—to the Panasonic Lumix 4/3 mirrorless camera. Now I must begin anew the process of familiarizing myself with it. I just took the new equipment on my recent workshop to the Eastern Sierras and Yosemite, thereby violating one of my cardinal rules: Never take a major photo trip until you are fully comfortable with your equipment. Not surprisingly, I often found myself fumbling with some controls and advanced features. (I reserved my fumbling for when I was alone; no need to embarrass myself in front of students.)

Since I was happy with my old system, why switch? Two simple reasons. The primary reason can be stated in one word: weight. As I get older, I opt for less weighty equipment, especially if I don't have to sacrifice picture quality; from what I've seen so far, my new GH3 and three lenses (ranging from 14mm to 350mm in full-frame 35mm equivalent) produce excellent quality...and at far less than half the weight of the comparable 35mm Canon system I just gave up. My Canon equipment, by the way, was substantially lighter than my previous Nikon film cameras with f. 2.8 lenses. For the kind of work I do now, and given the quality improvements in high ISO settings, those heavy (and expensive) f.2.8 lenses are no longer a necessity. Now I no longer feel like a pack horse... all the more because of the weight savings that hot-shoe flash—as opposed to heavy strobes—make possible. The equipment you see in the photo—camera body, three lenses, two flash, a half-dozen filters and considerable paraphernalia (not shown) weighs in at less than fourteen pounds. When stored in my backpack (along with a tripod), I hardly know it's there. In the photo of me running full-speed down the dune (prior page), my backpack didn't slow me down.

A secondary reason for switching systems is that this new camera, like most any new camera, has some nifty features my old system didn't have, like double exposure, advanced auto-bracketing, and faster fps.

My verdict on the new equipment: too soon to tell. So far, I'm quite pleased, but confess that some of the new features are not altogether friendly to this user. I'll know more after I shoot in Ireland next week... and beyond. In due course, I'll offer my evaluation.



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THE SUMMIT IS COMING ... THE SUMMIT IS COMING

SAVE THE DATE ... FOR THIS MEMORABLE EVENT IN EARLY 2015

INSTRUCTORS AND CLASSES WILL BE POSTED IN SEPTEMBER



Upcoming Horizon Workshops

August 10-17 Ireland: Landscapes & Locals (Full)

September 6: Abandoned Factory (Yorklyn, DE)

September 13-14: Flash Magic: Indoors & Outside*

October 18-19: Washington DC: Icons w/ a Creative Eye

October 31-Nov 2: Chesapeake City thru Nat Geo Eyes

November 8-9: Creative Vision*

November 15: Abandoned Factory (Yorklyn, DE)

* In Chesapeake City, MD