



Death Valley National Park

It's sometimes remarked that the deserts of America's Southwest are an acquired taste, but that is not true. They are beautiful in their own right, and there is no better example of this than Death Valley National Park. With salt flats, playas, sand dunes, old structures, and big skies there is something to photograph for anyone who enjoys making landscape images.

The park—the largest in the lower 48 states at 3.4 million square acres—can be easily reached via a five-hour drive from Los Angeles or a three-hour drive from Las Vegas. Once there, you can spend your nights in either in the motel in Stovepipe Wells Village (\$\$) or in Furnace Creek—the recently remodeled Inn (\$\$) or the Ranch (\$\$\$\$); and there is car camping if you so indulge.

At the risk of pointing out the obvious, the summers are very hot, but this leaves you a nice long October through May season for photography. Before going, get a good map of the park such as the one published by *National Geographic*. There are two gas stations in the park, both expensive. Distances are long, so fill your tank before you

enter the park and keep it full while there. Some locations are very remote, and you should always have lots of water, some food, and extra season-appropriate clothing in your car.

The most famous salt flat in the park is the Badwater Basin. It's located about 20 miles south of Furnace Creek and has a large parking area. It has the distinction of being the lowest elevation point in the USA at minus 282 feet. Figure a mile or so of walking on flat ground to get in position for photos. The salt polygons make great foreground objects to anchor an image, but try not to cut the one(s) in the center of your image in half. It's probably best shot in the winter and, if you can, hold out for a time when winter rains have flooded the basin (the park rangers, who are very responsive to emails, can give you the scoop on this). As a bonus for shooting in the winter, there may be snow on top of the highest point in the park, Telescope Peak, in the Panamint Mountains.

A little to the north but part of the same salt flat is the Devils Golf Course. Be careful if you



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Look south on Zabriskie Point for some nice close-ups

walk out into this—instead of flat polygons there are knee high salt structures that are easy to trip over and sharp. This area is good for photography at either sunset or sunrise although, if you want the rising sun on the Panamint Mountains to the west, be there early.

The playa to end all playas is of course the iconic Racetrack. It's the home of the famous moving rocks. Even though the mystery of how they move was finally put to bed a few years back (it wasn't aliens from nearby Area 51), it still remains a very unusual place and strong images can be made there. Getting there is a real challenge. After driving about 40 miles, mostly north from Stovepipe Wells, a 26-mile long dirt road takes you south to the Racetrack. The road is loaded with tire destroying rocks, and flat tires are very common, including one experienced by your author. This road should not be driven on unless you have a vehicle with relatively new tires and a full-size spare (heads up: a tow will set you



Footprints on the Eureka Dunes

back \$1000-\$2000, and you might spend a night out there). If you don't own an appropriate vehicle there is a company based at Furnace Creek that rents jeeps. The rocks are at the far south end of the playa. Try to find a rock with a twisting path, get low, and wait for last light. Be there at sunset as close to the winter solstice as possible.

The park has three sets of sand dunes. The easiest to get to, but the worst for photography, are the Mesquite Sand Dunes, just east of Stovepipe Wells right next to Route 190. Because they are so accessible, scores of people walk on them every day and they are pretty much ruined for photography purposes most of the time. They are also low, and it's hard to pull out a decisive feature to compose an image around. This said, if you happen to be there a day after a wind storm they will be clear of footprints, and there are nice sunrise images to be had.

Better choices—if you can get there—are the Ibex Sand Dunes and the Eureka Sand Dunes. Both get few visitors and are usually footprint free. The Ibex Sand Dunes are located at the park's far south end, a two-hour drive from Furnace Creek on Route 127, or about a 45-minute drive from Baker (I-15), also on Route 127. The last six miles are on a dirt road of mostly soft sand, and there is one crossing of a wash that usually has water in it from a nearby spring. It's very doable in a high clearance vehicle. There is a one plus mile walk out to the dunes when you reach the parking



The Mesquite Dunes the morning after a windstorm

area. These are excellent sunset shots, especially September through April.

With a summit point of about 700 feet the Eureka Dunes are the second highest in the USA. Reach them from Big Pine on Route 395, then 48 miles on Death Valley Road and Eureka Valley Road. The latter—nine miles long—is a difficult drive, similar to the road leading to the Racetrack.

Good photos on these dunes require a tiring climb part way up. They are best photographed as close to the summer solstice as possible.

No matter what sand dunes you are photographing, try to find some ripples at right angles to the rising or setting sun. Put them in your foreground for additional drama.

Death Valley has many structures dating from

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The Charcoal Kilns on Emigrant Canyon Road after dark



The Eureka Sand Dunes are the highest in the park

the 1800s that can highlight great images. A trip to the Rhyolite Ghost Town, outside the park boundaries near Beatty, NV is worthwhile. The ruined buildings won't get either early or late light but are fun to explore and contain good close up photograph possibilities. Fantastic night images can be made there. Charcoal kilns are found on Emigrant Canyon Road. This road is heavily rutted and often closed, so check on the park's website before you go. Again, night images may be your best option. There is also an old mining structure in back of the Ibex Sand Dunes.

The colorful badlands at Zabriskie Point at sunrise are perhaps the classic photo in the park, although the wider views have been extensively photographed. Shoot those anyway, but try zooming in on spots to your left for something a bit different. Just a little north of Zabriskie Point the Twenty Mule Team Canyon drive offers some other morning possibilities.

Other options for images include Artists Palette at sunset, the imbedded colorful rocks near the beginning of Mosaic Canyon, and, if you want to tackle the drive, Aquereberry Point on an evening with a good sky. And if coming from Los Angeles, consider detouring through Ridgecrest on Route 178 and out to the Trona Pinnacles for some interesting evening photos.

Try a few days of photography in Death Valley National Park and you will indeed acquire a taste for our country's stunning desert landscapes. ■

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The Mesquite Sand Dunes photographed from a distance on the south side of Route 190



The Ibex Sand Dunes are rarely visited and are a great photographic subject



The Devil's Golf Course and Telescope Peak