

About the Photographer

Steve has traveled throughout North America, taking pictures and shooting documentaries as he goes. He prefers spending time in western national parks and he's been to nearly all of them.

One of the purposes of his Western Portraits series is to encourage others to see these amazing places for themselves.



Western Portraits: Deserts

Photography and Words by Steve Salis

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Portraits of the West: Deserts



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About this book

I began exploring the deserts of the Western US in the late 80's. Having grown up in the Chicago area I was accustomed to temperate green landscapes. The West is dramatically different. Here vibrant oranges and reds contrast with strikingly blue skies - warm colors in harmony with high temperatures.

These pages capture the harsh beauty of America's deserts.

Steve Salis July 2010



Portraits of the West: Deserts

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Portraits of the West: Deserts

Much of the American West is desert. Not long ago, the west's more desolate places were to be avoided. Today, thanks in part to the nation's excellent park system, millions of the world's more intrepid visitors flock to these beautifully harsh environments to explore the vibrant landscapes that expose hundreds of millions of years of Earth's history.

By definition, the one thing that deserts have in common is a lack of precipitation. Many think deserts are nothing more than barren dunes. Sure there are deserts of dunes but here even the dunes come in multiple types. There are deserts of yellow sand and there are vast snow-white gypsum sand dunes. Dunes cover only a small part of the desert. Most of it is brightly colored and oddly textured. There are eroded buttes and pinnacles that rise more than a thousand feet above the surface. There are exposed faults that were thrust upward and then frozen in place to be reshaped by time.

Deserts are time machines. They allow you to see and explore hundreds of millions of years history.

They help to remind you of the importance of being prepared. If you're not, whether you're hiking, or even driving, you'll soon realize how quickly things will get bad if something goes wrong.

The desert is big, empty and wondrous it makes some introspective, others are compelled to dwell on larger issues. It's not surprising that three of the world's major religions have their roots in the desert.

The images in these pages only hint at the beautiful desolation. Experience it yourself!







4 **Above:** The hoodoos in Arches NP. **Facing page:** Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, OK.
Next Pages: Utah ranch, The Shafer Trail in Canyonlands NP.







Portraits of the West: Deserts

Monument Valley, Utah

I choose to begin with one of the icons of the American West. Everyone familiar with Hollywood westerns has seen Monument Valley. Prolific director John Ford shot here so often that an iconic viewpoint was named for him. A small building used as a set in the John Wayne film "The Searchers" is still there.

The valley is located in the northwestern corner of the four corners region. It is the heart of the Navaho Nation. There is a dusty dirt road through a portion of the valley, but to go into the backcountry you'll have to hire a Navaho guide.

Facing page: Monument valley's left mitten at sunset.





10 **Above:** Centennial Mesa from the trading post view point.
Facing page: John Ford Point







Monument Valley's "The Three Sisters". Legend has it that three Navaho sisters were turned to stone.
Facing page: The left mitten butte from the valley floor.



14 Monument Valley from near The Totem area.



The Tear Drop with Centennial Mesa in the distance. The only way to see this is to hire a Navaho Indian guide.





Traditions are kept alive in the valley. **Facing page:** The two mittens from the trading post viewpoint. 17





Portraits of the West: Deserts

Utah

Utah is an amazing place. Its wide variety of bizarre landscapes provides proof of the areas tumultuous past. Several faults created mountains that eroded into buttes, cliffs and other spectacular formations. Dunes of an ancient desert have turned to stone. Debris from the ancestral Rocky Mountains have been uplifted revealing the colorful remains of the long gone giants. The San Juan River cut into this same debris forming one of the best entrenched meanders in the world.

Erosion is the latest force to act upon Utah's deserts. Water carved canyons are now some of my favorite places.

On the east edge of the middle of the state is the outdoor lover's mecca of Moab. Two national parks and a state park are just a few miles away. In the center of the state is Hell's Backbone (background image). In the southwest corner there is another cluster of parks including my favorite desert park, Bryce Canyon.

Facing page: An exposed monocline fault near Mexican Hat.



20 Dead Horse Point at sunrise. From here there is a 300 degree view of Canyonlands National Park.



The Shafer Trail as seen from Deadhorse Point State Park. The trail is a dirt road traveling the western edge of the Islands in the Sky District of Canyonlands National Park.



22 Delicate Arch in Arches National Park near Moab Utah. The La Sal Mountains are about 35 miles away. In early summer you can hike in 100 degree heat in the morning and build a snowman in the afternoon.



Delicate Arch from the back viewpoint





Ancient Utah Juniper near the Fins area of Arches NP.
Facing page: Sunset in Arches National Park



26 Double O Arch is one of the largest arches in the park. It was used as a location for an Indiana Jones movie.



Left: odd trees and cobalt blue skies are trademarks of high deserts. **Right:** A window in the "Fins" area of Arches NP.



28 Landscape Arch in Arches NP. The arch span is about 100 yards across.



Left: the window in Arches National Park.

Right: Bryce Arch in Bryce Canyon National Park





Vegetation in Arches National Park.

Facing page: Balanced Rock in Arches National Park with the snow capped La Sal Mountains in the background.





Above left: flowers bloom near capital Reef NP. **Above right:** Farm in Capital Reef.
Facing page: The Windows in Arches NP





Left: hoodoos in Bryce canyon. **Right:** tree at Dead Horse Point. 35





The Navaho Loop Trail in Bryce NP



38 **Top left:** Canonlands from the Needles district viewpoint. **Bottom left:** moon rise over Moab, Utah. **Right:** Delicate Arch
Facing page: Mesa Arch in Canyonlands National Park

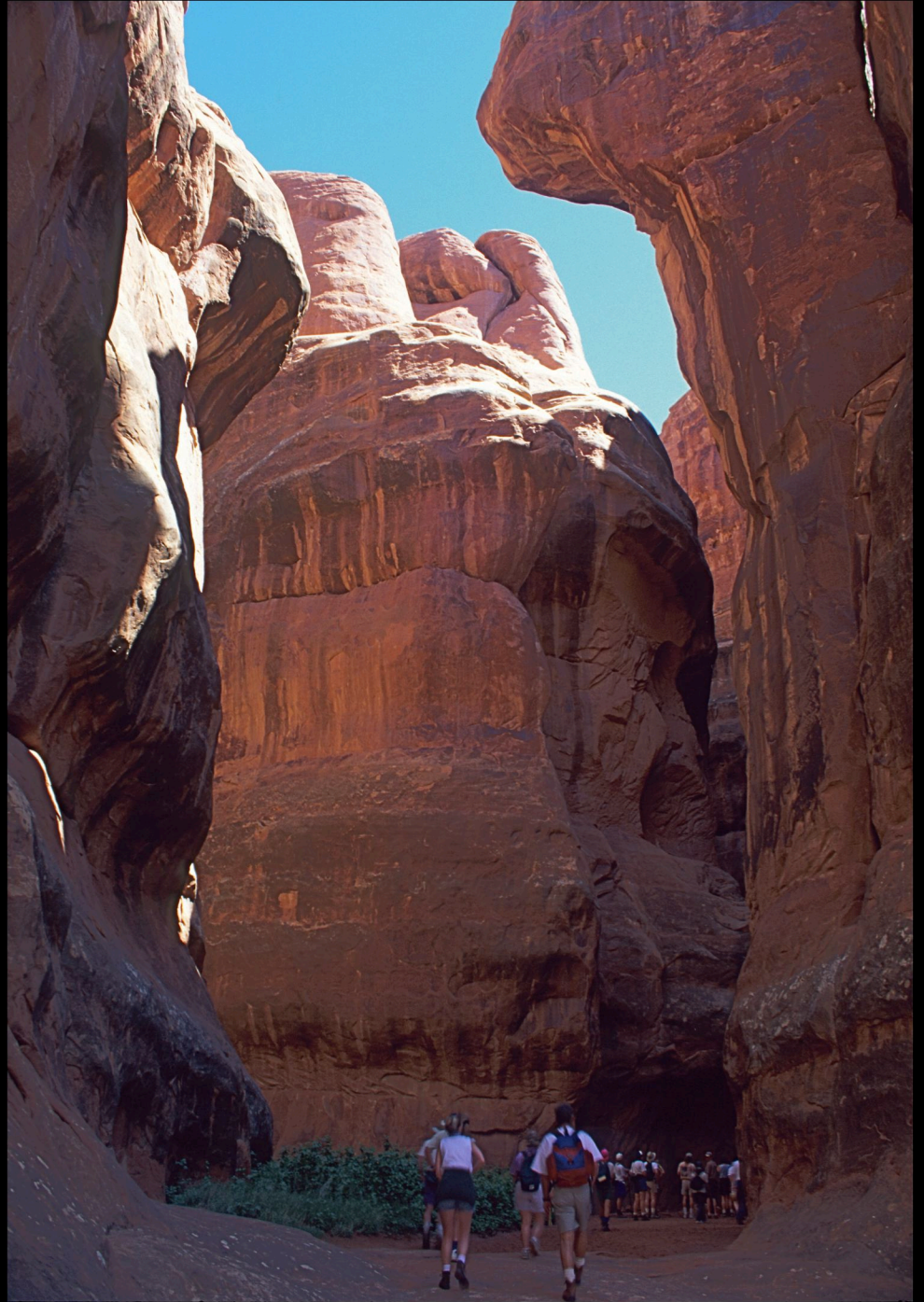






Above: clouds at sunset. **Below left:** crowds at mesa arch at dawn. **Below right:** rocks at Canyonlands. **Facing page:** Mesa Arch at sunrise.





Above: the Fins in Arches **43**
Below left: 5th Avenue in Arches NP. **Right:** hikers in the "Fins" of Arches NP









Portraits of the West: Deserts

West Texas

In the late 80's while looking for something interesting on my way to Big Bend National Park I stopped at a state park to catch a few winks. When I awoke, I was surrounded by sand and to my surprise they were very interesting.

I've been back to Monahans Sandhills State Park a few times since then to shoot the ever-changing dunes.





Monahans Sandhills State Park is one of the best places in North America to explore dunes on foot. Motorized vehicles are not allowed on the dunes.





Left: cemetery near Terrilingua, TX on the west side of Big Bend National Park
Right: around 1900 a few very optimistic pioneers thought it would be a good idea to open a spa near a natural hot spring along the Rio Grand. **Previous page:** Sunrise in Monahans, Texas



Portraits of the West: Deserts

Death Valley

The lowest place in North America is Death Valley. Oddly, it is sandwiched between two mountain ranges. I've only been there once. Luckily, it was in the spring of 2005 when for the first time in 100 years wildflowers returned.





54 In 2005, unusually large amounts of winter rain caused the floor of Death Valley to bloom for the first time in 100 years.



At the beginning of the twentieth century a few settlers thought they could work the land and make a living in the hottest place in North America. They were wrong.



56 **Left:** the Death Valley floor with its temporary lake in the distance. **Top right:** a rusted Ford. **Bottom right:** the road to Death Valley.



Rain shapes the desert. **Lower Left:** Natural Bridges National Monument. Look closely to see the bridge. **Upper Right:** An exposed boat ramp at Lake Powell shows the extent of the current decades long drought.



Cacti in southern Arizona



Portraits of the West: Deserts

Arizona

Arizona has more than the Grand Canyon.

The northeastern corner of the state is home to the Petrified Forest National Park and the Painted Desert. Also, in the Four Corners area is Canyon De Chelly National Monument. It's one of the largest Anasazi cliff dwelling sites.

New age types flock to Sedona because they believe the red rock is the home of vortices that will help you get in touch with your spiritual side. It's also a great place to take pictures.

The Colorado River's steep canyons form part of the northern border with Utah. This is the southern edge of canyon country. Antelope Canyon near Page is one of the most spectacular slot canyon anywhere.





Most look down into the Grand Canyon, **facing page**. On this occasion I looked up. There were high clouds and sunset was about 45 minutes away. When the sun to dip below the horizon this image was the result . **Next Page:** Horseshoe Bend





Antelope Canyon is one of several slot canyons near the Arizona Utah border. Wait and the sun will be in the perfect place





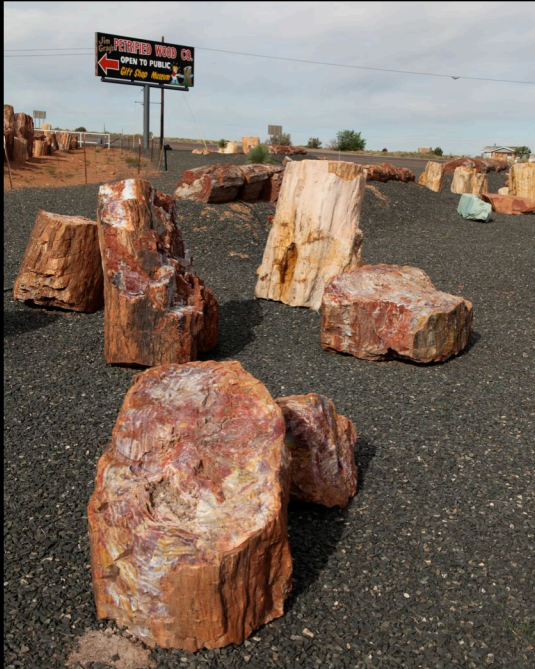


66 **Top left:** the walls of Antelope Canyon. **Bottom left:** Lake Powell. **Right:** Looking towards the sky in Antelope Canyon.













Portraits of the West: Deserts

New Mexico

At the end of World War II, the federal government was looking for a wasteland in the middle of nowhere to test captured German rockets. They decided on an area just to the west of a little town called Alamo Gordo, New Mexico. There was nothing there but hundreds of square miles of White Sand. Luckily, a portion of the White Sands has been designated a National Monument. The drifts may look like snow but when you're hiking them in 100 plus degree temperatures, you know they're not.

An hour to the north of White Sands is the Three Rivers Petroglyphs Site. It's one of the few locations in the Southwest set aside solely because of its rock art. It is also one of the few sites giving visitors direct access to the petroglyphs-- there's over 20,000 of them dating from 900 AD to 1400 AD.

In the southeast corner of the state is Carlsbad Caverns National Park. It's the home of the largest cave systems in the country.

Anasazi ruins are throughout the state. Some are not far from cities, others like Chaco Canyon National Monument are in the middle of nowhere.



74 The fine grains of gypsum were originally captured in rocks in these mountains. Over time they eroded out settled in this valley. Lighter mountain remnants blew away creating a sea of white.







Left: A yucca plant in full bloom. **Right:** Dunes in the backcountry 77



Left: Wind constantly moves the sand except where vegetation has taken hold. The roots bind the soil and over time a pinnacle forms under them as loose grains are blown away. **Right:** small ripples resemble fingerprints.



Above: Stalactites hanging from the roof of Carlsbad Caverns National Park. **Right:** the twin towers 79





Much of the formations in the cave look other worldly. Others look oddly familiar.

Portraits of the West: Deserts

Ruins

Western deserts are littered with the remains of vigorous and hopeful civilizations of the past. The first signs of settlement date back 12,000 years. Between 1400 and 800 years ago Native Americans built stone granaries, religious structures and rock art. Then they moved on to points unknown.

In the 1600's the Spanish left their mark. Then the optimistic Americans came, and in most cases, went.

Thankfully, we can now explore what they left behind. We can imagine what their lives might have been like and what might have caused their demise.

Background: Bandolier State Park



Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde National Park. These stone buildings were used to store grain up until about 800 years ago.



84 A ladder rises from a ceremonial kiva in Mesa Verde. Note the black soot left by ancient fires.



Right: living quarters in the Cliff Palace. **Left:** The White House in Canyon De Chelly National Monument in the Arizona section of the four corners area 85



86 These petroglyphs are near the east entrance to Capital Reef National Park. The art was made between 800 and 1200 AD. Some think that the drawings depict aliens from another planet. Note that some of the figures have only four fingers.



20,000 rock art examples cover nearly every blank space on the rocks in the Three Rivers Petroglyph site north of Alamo Gordo. For hundreds and perhaps thousands of years, the ancients left their mark here. They stopped about 700 years ago.





The circular pits are called Kivas. Ceremonial rights were performed in them. Chaco Canyon National Monument has one of the largest collections of Kivas in the US





Top left: old hotel in Terrilngua Texas. **Top right:** a kiva in Mesa Verde. **Bottom:** a former Mormon homestead in Utah. **Next page:** The goosenecks





Above: Newspaper Rock in Petrified Forest NP **93**
Facing page: The Green River flowing through Canyonlands NP

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ROUTE 66



Portraits of the West: Deserts

Route 66

From the late 1920's until it was decommissioned in the '80s the Mother Road, Route 66, was the road to the desert. In the early days most were traveling through, literally searching for greener pastures. It ran from Chicago to Los Angeles.

In the 1950's and 60's it was known as the "Main Street of America". It represented freedom and adventure. A number of songs were written about it and there was even a TV show where the main characters explored the route. In 1985 the route was decommissioned.

For years, Europeans traveled the route more than Americans. The Pixar movie "Cars" started to change that and today more people are interested in the route and the small towns struggling for relevance since they were bypassed by the interstate highway system.

This resurgence has encouraged the revitalization of many attractions and old motels along the route. You can still get your kicks and Route 66.





A sign welcomes visitors in New Mexico. A 1930's Packard that didn't make it. The leaning water tower in Texas. The gas station was used as a model for the town in the Pixar movie "Cars".





At Goosenecks State Park campers are encouraged to camp where ever they wish. It's a great place to become a part of the West.

