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Documenting Death Valley

Rick Sheremeta reveals how to photograph one of America's most famous national parks, located in one of the country's harshest environments.

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Images by Rick Sheremeta

Death Valley National Park, which stretches across Nevada and California, is known as the hottest and driest place in North America: The highest temperature in the U.S. was recorded in Death Valley in July 1913, when the mercury hit an unbearable 134 degrees Fahrenheit. But the park has also become a major American tourist attraction, with hundreds of hiking trails, historic sites, and awe-inspiring scenic areas, as well as a bustling visitor center that offers cultural and natural-history tours.

Rick and Dody Sheremeta camped at Death Valley last spring during the first week of April, using their Tamron SP 24-70mm VC and SP 70-300mm VC lenses to capture the rippling sand dunes, abandoned ghost towns, and Old West artifacts. "The day we got there it was 104 degrees with really strong, high winds," Rick says. "Late fall through early spring is probably the best time to plan a trip to Death Valley, since it can get so intolerably hot after that."

Prepping photographic equipment is crucial before heading out into the sometimes unforgiving environment. "There's a tremendous amount of dust in Death Valley," Rick explains. "Windstorms and sandstorms are a common occurrence. Do what you can to protect your camera: Leave it in the vehicle when you're not using it, wrap something like a towel around it or place it into a Ziploc bag or just keep it in your gear bag until you need to use it, and try not to swap lenses during a dust-up. However, it's inevitable that a little bit of dust will get in and cause dust spots. That's where the 'Spot Removal' tool in Lightroom and Photoshop comes in real handy."

There's no shortage of photographic opportunities in Death Valley and its immediate surroundings. "We stayed in the park's Furnace Creek Campground, adjacent to the Furnace Creek Resort," Rick says. "There's a mining museum at Furnace Creek that has a lot of interesting subject matter for detail shots,

including old mining equipment and steam engines. The Harmony Borax Works, which was the site of borax mining in the 1880s, is also a great place for detail photos of old mule wagons and other artifacts."

The scenery in the Death Valley region is famously spectacular. "The sand dunes are obviously on my must-see list while I'm there," Rick says. "There's also the Devil's Golf Course, a rough-textured salt pan in the valley with these gnarly halite-salt crystal formations. Badwater Basin, which is said to be North America's lowest point at 282 feet below sea level, is also a popular photo spot. So is Scotty's Castle (also known as the Death Valley Ranch) and the Racetrack, where rocks apparently move across the dry lakebed and leave trails behind them, even though no one actually sees the rocks ever moving."

With their alluring shadowed ripples and curves, the crescent-, linear-, and star-shaped sand dunes of the Mesquite Flat Dunes are one of the most popular photographic attractions in the park. "Sometimes I like to show people in my photos of the sand dunes for scale, since they're usually all over the sand dunes like ants during the day," Rick says. "But the best time to take pictures of the dunes is usually first thing in the morning the day after a sandstorm—everything has been washed over, with no trace of human activity."

Rick and Dody look for unusual ways to use light to showcase the sand dunes. "This is a true example of painting with light and showing off the dunes' textures with swaths of light and shadow," he says. "For the one image I show here that uses that effect, I trekked out to the dunes early in the morning. All the different layers of light draw the viewer's eye right into the image."

Using the light to his advantage was also key in capturing a sunset shot at Zabriskie Point, which offers a panoramic view. “It was a long, steep quarter of a mile up to this promontory, where you pretty much have a 360-degree view,” Rick says. “It’s especially gorgeous up there in the early morning and evening. I ended up using an HDR effect for the image shown here, because the light had already set over the mountains, but the sky was still so beautiful. You can see all the different layers in the sedimentary rock formations.”

Visitors can drive the one-way road to Titus Canyon, replete with colorful rock formations, rare plants, petroglyphs, and a small ghost town called Leadfield. “You can get some terrific photos out there, too, but it’s high-clearance driving,” Rick explains. “There are some hairy spots that someone in a regular

car might find a little scary, but if you have a truck or Jeep, it's a great help. We have a four-wheel-drive diesel truck that we use to tow our fifth-wheel trailer, which pretty much gets us anywhere we needed to go."

Head past Titus Canyon to hit Rhyolite, a ghost town located on private and federal land about 30 miles from Furnace Creek. "There are only a handful of buildings left there, including the remnants of the three-story Cook Bank and some tiny miner cabins," Rick says. "In most of these Old West ghost towns, there's very little left. People have scavenged the towns for raw building material or firewood and picked them clean."

When documenting ghost towns such as Rhyolite, it can be challenging to focus on a subject due to physical limitations. "I was trying to get some pictures of the Cook Bank, which was really a handsome building in its heyday," he says. "Now certain areas are fenced off. If you look down in the bottom corner of the photo I took, you can spot a shadow from the barbed-wire fence that's strung around it, like a prison. It's isolated to discourage people from getting in and climbing around, since there are reinforcing rods and other exposed items; plus, anything can fall down at any time. I just stuck my camera through the barbed wire and used the fencepost as an impromptu tripod to get the shots I wanted. I did the same thing in Leadfield: I had to push my camera through the bars of the abandoned mineshaft and use a long exposure to get pictures there."

While photographing the Cook Bank building, Rick had to come up with a way to block out some of the more distracting physical elements. "There's a little house near the bank with a lot of junk in front of it—I'm thinking it may have been a caretaker's house at one time," he says. "But I didn't want that in my picture. I took the shot at 24mm to isolate my subject, and I used some of those rocks in the foreground to lead into the image. I used a polarizer to really bring out the blue sky."

Rick faced a similar compositional challenge in photographing one of the town's abandoned Union Pacific Railroad cars, which was surrounded by debris he didn't want in the image. "I used the 24-70 to get a bunch of different perspectives from varying distances and angles," he says. "The car itself was neat, with lots of detail on it, and again, the blue sky served as a perfect contrast to the red caboose. It took a while before I was able to get this particular shot, which allowed me to focus strictly on the car itself and not the distracting background."

To see more of Rick and Dody Sheremeta's work and learn about their workshops, go to www.alpenglowproductions.com (http://www.alpenglowproductions.com) .