

Earth

by Jon Gnass

Badlands: "A mysterious elsewhere—an endless supernatural world more spiritual than earth but created out of it."

HAVING ARRIVED IN SOUTH DAKOTA'S Badlands National Park under the cover of darkness, I was all but guessing about a place to photograph. Pulling my rig off the road at Changing Scenes Overlook, at the north end of the park, I gathered my photo gear and groped my way to a vista overlooking the Yellow Mounds. Previous shots I had seen of these painted hills of clay looked to be a sure bet for a picture. Now if only the light would cooperate.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright wrote of his 1935 visit to the Dakota badlands: "What I saw gave me an indescribable sense of mysterious elsewhere—an endless supernatural world more spiritual than earth but created out of it." I was looking forward to experiencing Wright's description of this mysterious place and waited eagerly for the first light of dawn.

As twilight broke over the Great Plains, painting a backdrop of ethereal pinks and purples, the landscape came alive. Momentarily transfixed, I came to my senses and began photographing this magical moment with my trusty Pentax 6x7 camera. I couldn't have wished for a more fulfilling photographic sampling of such a tortured looking landscape.

As the sun continued to rise through the shifting clouds, the ever-changing light played off towering cathedrals of hardened mudstone and siltstone. Fissures creating an exciting network of patterns crisscrossed the Yellow Mounds and gullies of playa. Accented by a patchwork of mixed prairie grasses, the list of ingredients for a splendid series of pictures was complete.

Finally, layers of clouds began to

obscure the sun. The light faded. I packed my camera gear and started hiking back to my camper when a splat of rain hit my head. In an instant, the sun smiled back through a hole in the clouds. As luck would have it, a rainbow appeared. Racing back to the vista where I was previously photographing, I hastily set up my tripod and camera in time to click off five exposures. The rainbow vanished as fast as it appeared. Still reeling with excitement, I sat down to take in the view of this bizarre, yet beautiful geologic wonderland.

Badlands are scattered around the western United States. North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park's landscape is similar to Badlands National Park. Theodore Roosevelt once remarked, "I never would have been president if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota." Roosevelt raised cattle here during the 1880s and 1890s.

South Dakota's Badlands date back to the Oligocene Epoch, some 30 million years ago. Mixtures of lush green prairie grasses and wildflowers adorn the surrounding landscape in May and June. As one of the world's premiere Oligocene sites, paleontologists have documented more than 250 species of mammal fossils. Bison and prairie dogs abound and are only a telephoto lens away from the road. For those who love to hike, there are plenty of places to explore and a variety of subjects to photograph. Detail patterns of cracked playa is a favorite in these parts.

John Day Fossil Beds National Monument in Oregon, with its Painted Hills, is spectacular during and after rain storms. The weathering of volcanic ash has created mounds

of red, pink and buff tones that melt into a mosaic of patterns and textures. During springtime, wildflowers, such as yellow bee plant, ravish the gullies. Interspersed throughout the banded layers of sediments are some of the richest and most diverse animal and plant fossil beds in the world.

California's Death Valley National Park conjures up stunning vistas from Zabriskie Point, Artists Palette, Twenty Mule Canyon and in Golden Canyon. Iron oxides reveal colors in an array of hues of the surrounding clay hills and towering monoliths. Plant life is quite sparse in these areas.

Wildflowers do bloom, usually beginning in early March, mostly on the valley floor and in the lateral canyons.

Death Valley is one of the hottest places on the planet. A tip when traveling to this Hellhole—summers get sizzling hot! July records have scorched the charts at 134 degrees Fahrenheit.

Petrified Forest National Park, with its lunar hills of the Blue Mesa, severely eroded badlands and scattered chunks of petrified logs, is a curious area to photograph. Iron oxides pervade the soil of the Painted Desert, giving hummocks of bentonitic clay their distinctive red tones. Some of the oldest dinosaur, fish and plant fossils excavated here date back 225 million years.

The dynamic processes of precipitation and erosion, caused by water and wind, continues to denude and sculpt these primordial landscapes. Geologists and paleontologists use the geological column (a full sequential strata record of the Earth's crust) to date these geologic periods of time.

Clay formations make for fascinating photography in some of these areas. After rainstorms, the rain-soaked clay can expand up to eight times its original thickness. Baked by the sun, this metamorphosis causes the surface to crack and crumble into a texture of colors. The occurrence renders endless photographic possibilities.

Reading up on these regions beforehand will greatly enhance your photography. Spring is the best season: early March in the Southwest and starting around May in the northern states. When planning your photo trip, be attentive to the weather, temperatures and road conditions. Temperatures can range between both extremes of the thermometer. To the uninitiated or unprepared, these rugged landscapes can be very unforgiving.

When shooting these areas, my camera gear consists of a Pentax 6x7 system and an arsenal of lenses ranging from 45mm up to 300mm. For foreground work, I prefer using my 45mm and 55mm lenses. To capture bold and dramatic scenes, I go with my 200mm and 300mm lenses. I shoot Fuji Velvia film most of the time. You need all the color you can get when shooting in these nearly bone-dry climates.

Many of the exotic features and formations I've talked about are easily photographed from vantage points along park roads. But to really capture the true spirit of these marvelous geologic theme parks, walk the Earth—feel and taste the desolate and grim beauty of these Badlands.

Jon Gnass is based in Bend, Oregon.