

Capturing Southwest Light

Larry Lindahl explores his desert home in search of the unexpected

Sedona, Arizona, is a special place. Outdoor enthusiasts know it for its ubiquitous red sandstone rock formations, which have drawn photographers for decades who juxtapose the almost glowing red rocks with deep blue skies for dramatic landscape images. It's the natural beauty that first drew photographer Larry Lindahl to the region. But his aesthetic tends to look past the most obvious and dramatic compositions in favor of the more unique offerings around Sedona, and the desert, in general.

"The subject matter I'm drawn to runs a fairly wide gamut," he says. "From Southwestern landscape images to Native American traditions, close-ups of butterflies, wildflowers, backpacking stories... What I enjoy most in photography is telling a story through a series of images."

The story that Lindahl's photography tells about the Southwest is one of an area in constant change. It's easy for amateurs to assume that, in a beautiful region such as Sedona, you simply show up before sunrise, snap a picture and hike home. Some photographers may



By William Sawalich / Photography By Larry Lindahl





*Sedona-based photographer Larry Lindahl takes us on a tour through his own backyard, Arizona Canyon Country. **OPENING SPREAD:** Clouds hover over Camels Head Rock in the Munds Mountain Wilderness Area. **INSET:** A garter snake approaches a creek bank looking for prey; A swallowtail butterfly finds nectar on a blossoming fendler bush along the slopes of Doe Mountain in Coconino National Forest. **THIS PAGE, LEFT:** Blooming agave in midmorning sunlight along shaded sandstone cliff walls in Woods Canyon, Coconino National Forest.*



take that approach, but Lindahl prefers to photograph at the edges—the times of greatest flux when the landscape comes alive.

“Timing is everything in so many memorable pictures,” he says. “Clouds floating into perfect position, a rainbow appearing after a storm or finding a rattlesnake drinking water from a spring. It’s those moments that keep me coming back for more. And it’s in those moments that I feel most aware of the spiritual element that animates all life.

“The juxtaposition of opposites in the Southwest is something I seek,” Lindahl continues, “especially those places where sandstone and water meet in the desert. Those scenes make the most engaging photographs. The eye dances with the geometry of shapes and the drama of opposites—wet and dry, transparent and opaque, fluid and unyielding, reflective and textured—meeting together, charging a scene with energy. I like that visual dance; it’s playful and serious all at the same time.”

One of Lindahl’s favorite photographs, an agave in full bloom, represents the tension between the rough-hewn stone canyons and the soft beauty of a flower. And it came from a serendipitous moment of personal connection with the landscape.

“On the fifth day of following a boulder-strewn wilderness canyon,” explains Lindahl, “my hiking partner and I rounded a sharp corner, and there was the most beautiful agave I had ever seen against a cliff wall. The tall stalk above the spiky plant was in perfect full bloom, and we had gotten there at the absolute perfect time of day. The cliff was still in shade while the yellow flowers were, for the moment, highlighted in bright overhead sunlight. The juxtaposition was stunning and serene at the same time. An hour before, and the agave would have been in the shade, a half hour later, and the cliff wall washed out with direct light. The timing was pure synchronicity. The circumstances that day were so perfect that the photograph almost looks unreal.”

It’s easy to hear in Lindahl’s words a passion both for photography and the natural world. He works to tune in to the emotions elicited by a place in order to shape the photographs he makes of it.

“When I’m shooting close-ups of wildflowers,” he explains, “I recognize that I’m feeling curious and in synch with the wonder of life. Or when I shoot



PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP: Eminence Break beachhead on the Colorado River in Grand Canyon. PREVIOUS PAGE, BOTTOM: The Nuns formation in Coconino National Forest. THIS SPREAD, LEFT: Red Rocks beneath a sunset at storm's break, with Mount Wilson and Shiprock in the distance. ABOVE: Palatki ruins of the Sinagua ancient Indian culture near Sedona, Ariz.

landscapes during the magic hour, I sense a spiritual connection to the richness of life. I'm working with my emotions, recognizing their spectrum of shades and colors, and letting them into my creativity."

Although Lindahl wants to showcase his own personal connections with nature through his photography, it's also clear that he's in the business of

honoring the landscape. After all, the real landscape he encountered upon moving to Sedona 16 years ago stoked his passion for photography.

"I was inspired to explore," he says of the region, "and felt like a kid with the biggest backyard you could ever imagine. Not only did I find the rock formations fascinating in their uniqueness, I soon discovered that the light is truly

magical at times. The rock formations and what geology has offered in the way of textures and patterns seem infinite. I constantly find new ways to photograph Sedona that keep my interest going. Just add snow, and the landscape is all new. Go out on a day when the clouds are building, and the sky becomes as important as the rock formations, and the combination becomes very powerful."

Unlike many parts of the state, Sedona experiences all four seasons, thanks to its high elevation. The changing weather plays a large part in the unique images that it affords Lindahl the opportunity to create.

"We get a few snowstorms each winter," he says. "The fall color is scattered, but absolutely brilliant when you find it, and stunning sunsets seem to develop frequently. On top of that, Sedona was

once inhabited by an ancient culture. When you visit the Hopi mesas, you may see the same petroglyphs and clan symbols that you find in Sedona.

"Living in Sedona has given me the chance to return to scenes again and again," he adds. "A seasonal waterfall or rain pool may exist for only days. And to get a window of light under storm clouds or a fresh snowfall in conjunction with one of these temporary occurrences takes a little luck after going back to the scene numerous times. When it all comes together, the photograph may look so easy. But as anyone who does this kind of work knows, it's not."

The Tech & The Technique

Lindahl's love for photographing the region has grown since his arrival in 1993. Obviously, photography itself has changed much in that time, and while Lindahl's approach has evolved both creatively and technically, when it comes to landscapes, he's still working with a traditional analog approach.

"When I first moved to Sedona I was using a Nikon FE2 camera," he says, "getting a few images published in cal-

endars, postcards, a few books and national park printed materials. Then one day I made an appointment and showed my work to *Arizona Highways* magazine. Photo editor Pete Ensenberger was encouraging, but he told me they needed work done with a 4x5 or medium-format camera for the high-quality landscape images that they published.

"That's when I got serious," Lindahl continues. "I chose the Pentax 67 camera because it was similar to an SLR camera, only it made images about four times as large. I respect the photographers who have dedicated themselves to using large-format cameras. I sacrificed the dramatic near-far depth of field of 4x5, but I adapted my own style using medium format."

Lindahl's style involves getting his camera into places that would be tricky with a larger camera and shooting at a faster pace to catch subtle changes in the landscape that would be nearly impossible. There are trade-offs, but the advantages for Lindahl outweigh the negatives—and they have positively shaped his personal style.

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Clearly, Lindahl's successes with his Pentax far outweigh the negatives. He's happy shooting film for as long as it will have him.

"There's a rich depth and authenticity of color in film," he says. "I compare it to the recorded music I grew up with. With analog recordings, there's an organic quality to the sound that digital doesn't contain. Good or bad, it's a feeling to the sound, and with photography, at some point I think the super-sharp, hyper-reality of digital is beyond what the human eye actually experiences.

"When will I begin shooting landscapes in digital?" Lindahl asks, rhetorically. "The writing is on the wall, as the stories of Kodachrome and Polaroid going extinct have so clearly demonstrated. Who knows? Velvia may disappear next. So the time is very near for me to go completely digital."

Lindahl currently does provide his Velvia chromes with "new life" in the digital darkroom, although instead of

thinking as a painter with an infinite palette of special effects at his fingertips, he has taken the Ansel Adams approach of meticulously perfecting reality in every image without forsaking reality.

"I enjoy seeing what information has been hidden in the images and what I can get out of a scan," Lindahl says. "The philosophy that Ansel Adams had was that the negative was the score and the print the performance. He made landscape photography into an art because of his darkroom work. The Kodachrome era missed that opportunity. We're in an exciting age for photographers."

Although the emotional connection with the landscape is paramount for Lindahl, he doesn't disregard technique as just a bare necessity. Rather, he fully understands the way equipment shapes his experience, whether he's photographing a mountain or skiing down it. But he doesn't seem likely to let equipment concerns and technical limitations unduly influence his experience of the landscape or the reason he makes his photographs as he does.

"Often, I like to just go exploring to find a photogenic subject," he says. "It's

a great excuse to go hiking all day. If it's wildflower season, you know you're going to find something somewhere. But I also like to set myself up for the purposefully unexpected. One summer I went out in the worst monsoon rainstorms every chance I could. I would gear up and just head straight into the approaching black storm. It meant being extremely uncomfortable for a while, and then I witnessed sandstone cliffs shedding waterfalls and watched red rocks shine purple when the storm broke. Waterfalls are exhilarating in a small, tight, side canyon, and they may only last half an hour."

Adds Lindahl, "But when it's over, and it's captured inside the camera, the reward is well worth the effort." **OP**

To see more of **Larry Lindahl's** photography, visit www.larrylindahl.com.



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