

"With a Camera in Old NavajoLand"

Text by Navajo Indian Photographer
LeRoy DeJolie

Everywhere you look in NavajoLand, nature presents itself in artistic ways. Lines, patterns, textures, shapes and form appear in both the intimate and grand landscape around us. These are the core examples of the compelling and graphic elements I try to employ in all my images I produce from my homeland here in the northern reaches of Arizona on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

As we move into the 21st century, many visitors choose to document their visit to NavajoLand either digitally or with more conventional and traditional types of cameras. I for one have opted to express myself by continuing to carry on the time-honored tradition of large format photography. As a young lad, I developed a special appreciation for my 8 X 10 large format photographic equipment (circa 1952) that goes beyond just producing fabulous images, but rather exercising my passion to simply savor each moment. Since it takes a great deal more effort and time to set up the big camera to photograph a landscape, I am forced to select my subjects, analyze the lighting situation and very carefully compose for my final composition. You naturally become a more thoughtful photographer and pay greater attention to details in your immediate surrounding.

With these thoughts in mind, I have carefully selected a few details and techniques that have worked for me in years past and perhaps ultimately share my distinct perspective with you and to help you plan and successfully document your next photographic adventure, through NavajoLand.

- **THE FIRST RULE TO NATURE AND LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY:** So obvious that you may easily overlook it - is to make sure you go the right places at the right time. You are highly unlikely to find a great image to photograph merely wondering through the wilderness during high noon. It's obvious that the most beautiful lighting – *which I call SWEET LIGHT* - on any landscape is low-angled sunlight. I prefer the sun much lower on the horizon. Early morning and late evening lighting are ideal times of the day when shadows are long, textures are more defined and dramatic and the light is golden.

- **KNOW YOUR EQUIPMENT.** Ideally you would have a full range of accessories with you when traveling. I've found when conducting my photography workshops throughout NavajoLand that trying to carry more than is comfortable merely discourages you from taking the images you want. A strong argument is to keep your selection simple. A sturdy, comfortable canvas backpack can carry your full outfit needed for most adventures, whether you decide to take a short or long hike into the back-country. Remember to bring a hat along to help protect you from the noonday's sun, and sturdy boots as well to help support your ankles, as grounds are not usually flat!

- **TRIPODS** - A sturdy tripod is the "American Express" of most nature and landscape photography: Don't leave home without it! I utilize a sturdy 1938 model Ries wooden tripod. It continues to serve me well to this day.

- **FILM** - With slide film, you get the best image saturation and sharpness. I use Fuji Velvia 100F film. It gives me extreme sharpness in details and rich saturated colors. Print film users can go up to ISO 200 with very good results as well. Today's 6-megapixel digital cameras can deliver a stunning 16 X 20 print, perhaps equivalent to a 4 X 5 transparency in the same print size. Note: Unless otherwise noted, most publishing companies today elect only to use correctly exposed color transparencies submitted for their particular publication.

- **LENSES** - You can take good landscape images back home with you with any focal length lens. I choose to use a wide-angle lens 90% of the time, somewhere in the realm of a 24mm, with my landscape images. The results of a wide angle effect allows me emphasize the details in my foreground and ultimately adds to an interesting perspective. A longer focal length lens in the realm of a 100mm or longer is ideal for details and close-up of faces at special events such as at a pow-wow and also for various views of distant landscapes. Of course, individual choices will differ according to special interests.

- **FILTERS** - I've found that a wide range of filters are really unnecessary in the field. Basic filters for color film are a polarizer to darken the blue skies above, and a warming filter such as an 812, a Heliopan KR-3 or a 81A and 81B to warm hues on dull days.

- **CAMERA** - Perhaps the best camera to capture the ever-changing light here in Old NavajoLand might be the one you already own. Perhaps you're in the market to invest in a camera to bring along with you on your future adventures to NavajoLand. The most important advice of all, however, is personal experience. Whether you own a digital camera or own an SLR camera, make certain you consider a camera with the following features:

1. Depth of field preview - to pre-judge the zone of sharp focus from near to far.
2. Consider a mirror lock-up - to prelock the reflex mirror before making an exposure to prevent vibration when shooting with a long lens.
3. A cable or an electronic release - for vibration-free photography.
4. Manual override for automatic exposures - to help fine tune exposure settings; bracketing by over and under exposing your composition.
5. 100 percent viewfinders - for a full view of everything the film records.

- **DIGITAL CAMERAS** - White balance is a unique quality for digital cameras. It allows the camera to examine the color of the light and adjusts the color balance of the image to make white neutral. This could be a problem to some or a creative tool to others. We expect our sunrises and sunsets to be warm in tone in photographs because we're used to seeing them with daylight-balanced film. The digital camera can give such a scene a whole range of color balance.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

However well you prepare the groundwork for a trip before leaving home, there is no substitute for the on-the-spot research. The more information you can glean from local sources, the more chances you have of finding unusual viewpoints or rich photographic source materials. Begin with published information - guides, maps and postcards from bookshops, airports and hotels. Studying postcards is particularly useful; you can put yourself in the photographer's position and then consider other possible viewpoints and approaches. Next visit the local tourist office and travel agents. There you can get free and up-to-date literature and detailed information on subjects that interest you. A list of organized tours, even if they are too expensive or not to your taste, can be helpful when you plan your own excursions.

Finally, remember that your best sources are all around you: the local Navajo people. Never hesitate to ask and ask again. A good sound policy is to ask several people the same question, because not all the information you receive will be reliable. I have used the helpful tips of the local staff at the hotel I've stayed at. Perhaps inquire about hiring a local Navajo guide to guide you into lesser known areas to help you capture that perfect moment on film. Be safe, and drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated....Remember to expect desert-like conditions!